

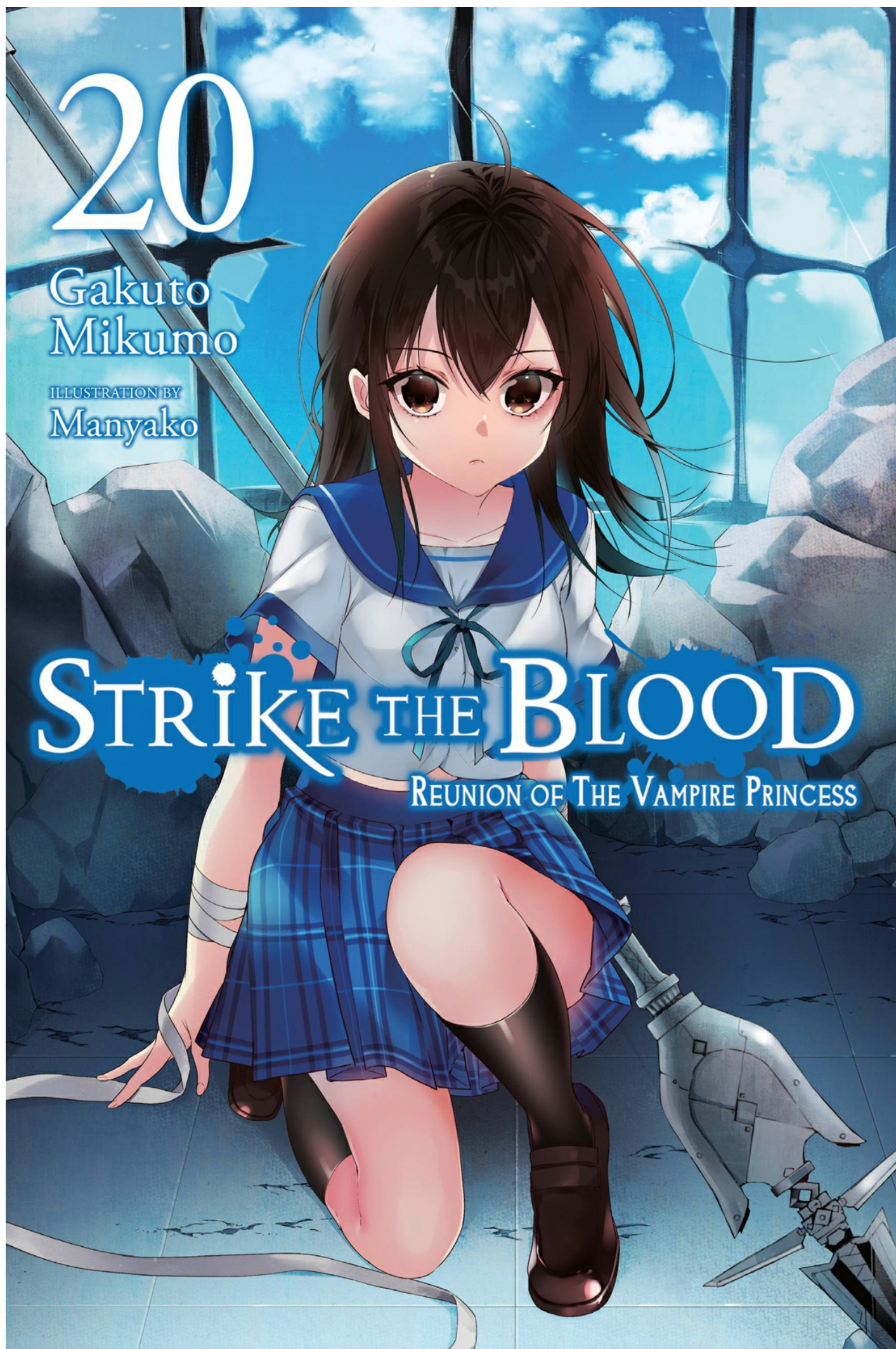
20

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

REUNION OF THE VAMPIRE PRINCESS







20

STRIKE THE BLOOD

REUNION OF THE VAMPIRE PRINCESS

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Avrora Florestina
Kaleid Blood
The Twelfth Sleeping Princess



Yukina Himeragi

Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

**Shizuri Kasugaya
Castiella**

Paladin
Pure and noble knight
of the fiery blade



Giada Kukulkin
Chaos Bride
Shape-Shifting,
Lovely Jade-Eyed Despot

Aswadguhl Aziz
Fallgazer
Lord of Destruction,
Bewitching Sovereign of Death

Contents

Intro

Chapter One An Awful Morning

Chapter Two Omens Foretelling a Feast

Chapter Three Decisions

Chapter Four Reunion of the Vampire Princess

Outro

Afterword

STRIKE THE BLOOD

REUNION OF THE VAMPIRE PRINCESS

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
PRESS
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 20

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Yen On edition edited by Carly Smith & Yen Press Editorial Cover art by Manyako

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Intro](#)

[Chapter One: An Awful Morning](#)

[Chapter Two: Omens Foretelling a Feast](#)

[Chapter Three: Decisions](#)

[Chapter Four: Reunion of the Vampire Princess](#)

[Outro](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



INTRO

Moonlight trickled in from the window, illuminating her face.

The girl was ephemerally beautiful, almost a crystallization of the moon's glow itself.

She had pale, nearly transparent skin that gave off no sense of warmth.

Her long blond hair was done in a triple braid; it changed color as it swayed depending on the level of light, like a billowing flame.

And hovering in her gleaming blue eyes was an air of pure bewilderment.

Why was she here? Even that was beyond her comprehension.

It was as if she had awoken from a very long dream.

Or perhaps as though she had just been brought back to life—

“Good morning, Sleeping Princess. A splendid evening, isn't it?”

The girl slowly shifted her gaze upon hearing someone else's voice.

Standing beside her bed was a woman wearing a wrinkled white gown.

The woman's eyes were bloodshot, and her hair was a mess. She gave off a slovenly image, completely bereft of nervousness.

“Do you remember who I am?”

The lady in white posed the question amicably, a smile across her youthful face.

“Mimo...”

As the girl reflexively attempted to answer the question, she trailed off in apparent confusion. Her memories had been mixed with someone else's; it was difficult to tell where her own experiences began and ended.

“Thou art my... Nay, the mother of that kind-hearted priestess, are you

not...?”

“Spot on. So you and Nagisa really did share a consciousness.”

Gazing at the bewildered girl with great interest, the woman in the white gown smiled pleasantly.

Her name was Mimori Akatsuki, chief of research of the medical branch of MAR—Magna Ataraxia Research. She was also the mother of Kojou Akatsuki. Amid her vague, dreamlike memories, the girl somehow grasped that about her. And also that she was Nagisa’s mother and a researcher of the artificial vampire known as the Twelfth, Aurora— “Where is this place?” inquired the girl as she surveyed the area in apparent fright.

She was in a cramped room surrounded by four transparent glass walls. It wasn’t in her memories.

Her bedside was crowded with numerous medical devices—from which a variety of tubes and cables extended to connect with the girl’s slender arms.

It seemed like both a hospital and a lab, but the spartan walls covered with thick concrete felt somehow oppressive. It was like a cage for showing off a ferocious beast.

“It’s very quiet, isn’t it? This is Blue Elysium’s Demon Beast Park.”

“A blue...paradise?”

The girl’s eyebrows quivered slightly in apparent surprise.

The area was part of Itogami Island’s Demon Sanctuary, a sub-float constructed on the Pacific Ocean. She had a memory of days spent visiting its facilities as a tourist... She remembered attending as the human who called herself Nagisa Akatsuki.

“I brought you here while you were asleep. Itogami Island proper is a bit of a mess right now, you see. That’s the reason you awoke.”

“Ohhh...the advent of the kings?”

“Precisely,” replied Mimori Akatsuki, grinning as she nodded.

The girl bit her lip slightly. Like a bird sensing a nearby storm, her keen senses

had picked up the enormous demonic energies that had appeared on Itogami Island.

So overwhelming that they were on par with any natural disaster.

The primogenitors, the three pillars of vampirekind, had appeared on Itogami Island.

And so, their demonic energy had awakened her body. The will of the beast slumbering within her had compelled the girl who hosted it to awaken, so that she might prepare for the crisis to come— “How is your body?”

Mimori’s hands were still thrust into her pockets as she posed the question, her tone light, as if she was making small talk.

“I am unhindered—”

No problem, the girl seemed to say, drawing in her breath slightly.

The scene of her own death came to mind.

To destroy Root, the wicked soul that could justly be called the mind of a god-killing weapon, she had died—impaled herself with a purging stake to annihilate her body.

With Nagisa Akatsuki serving as her icon, her soul had remained tethered to the real world, but these were no more than vestiges of her existence. Indeed, with the passage of time, she would have surely faded away one day like nothing more than a fleeting illusion.

And yet, in her current state, she had been granted a physical body.

A living receptacle different in no respect from that of her previous life. A vampire body.

“Was the vessel for mine soul not lost...?”

She uttered the words as she stared at her own two hands.

Mimori Akatsuki kindly narrowed her eyes as she observed the shocked girl.

“Hektos left her body behind for you. Her blood memory has been overwritten, allowing you to inherit it. They were all the same model to begin with, though, so nothing should feel out of place.”

“Hektos’s sacred remains serve as mine avatar...”

The girl murmured this in a daze. She bit her tiny lip, as if to suppress the emotions flooding out of her.

“Now Hektos is inside Kojou. She has become a Beast Vassal, part of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Kojou...!”

The girl’s face jerked up. Violently tearing away from the intravenous drip tubes impaling her arms, she closed the distance with Mimori.

“I entreat thee, take me to his side...!”

“I suppose you would like that. I want to bring you and Kojou together, too, but it’s a little difficult right now.”

Mimori shook her head slightly, pressing gauze over the wounds on the girl’s arms. By the time she wiped away the trickling blood, the injuries had already vanished. Such was the regenerative ability vampires possessed.

“Why is this so...?”

The girl glared at her with a look of reproach.

Just then, quiet noises breached the tension, and one of the walls opened.

A man in a white gown entered alongside a group of armed soldiers.

He glanced down at the girl, his eyes glinting with the coldness of someone examining an inanimate object.

The girl’s body went rigid, apparently frightened of the light in his eyes.

It wasn’t that she sensed hostility from his gaze. If anything, it was the opposite. He regarded her as nothing more than a guinea pig. That callousness scared her.

“Chief Akatsuki, thank you for all your hard work. From this point onward, the Ninth Lab will be taking over administration of the Twelfth.”

The man in the white gown presented a tablet to Mimori displaying a document for the handover.

“My, my, you arrived so quickly.”

Mimori took the tablet as she sarcastically added, “*Such professionalism.*”

He ignored her as he turned toward the girl.

“Test Subject Number Twelve—we will now proceed to examine you. First, we must inspect your body, then your mind, and then the state of the Beast Vassal’s seal.”

Without a word, the soldiers trained their gun barrels toward the girl, her body still rigid with fright.

They were equipped with needle guns for capturing vampires, which fired thin silver iridium–alloy quills that neutralized their targets when delivered in sufficient quantities. The Holy Ground Treaty had banned these weapons for their inhumanity.

The man in the white gown called out to the girl, his politeness nothing but a thin veneer.

“But do rest at ease. MAR guarantees your safety. After all, you are currently the last of the Kaleid Bloods—a legacy of the Devas.”

“Uh...ah...”

Rejecting his assertion, the girl weakly shook her head.

However, he showed no sign of caring about her demeanor. The volition of a guinea pig meant absolutely nothing to him.

As this understanding dawned on the girl, despair overtook her.

She wasn’t afraid of this man in the white gown or of the soldiers he’d brought with him. No, what she feared was herself—and the Beast Vassal slumbering within her.

Surely, that proud, monstrous bird of ice would refuse to permit its host to be used as a guinea pig. But if the Beast Vassal awoke in anger, everything would end. It would undoubtedly annihilate these men and take the tiny artificial island with it.

The girl was powerless to stop this.

After all, she was not the ruler of the Beast Vassal but rather a simple seal—
“If you politely do as you’re told, I’ll treat you to something really tasty, ’kay?”

Mimori spoke cheerfully to the trembling girl, attempting to console her.

“Yes, of course.”

The man in the white gown nodded without any display of emotion.

The corners of Mimori’s lips rose to form a charming, mischievous smile.

“But that’s not really the issue, is it?”

“...Chief Akatsuki? What do you think you’re...?”

He narrowed his eyes. This was because Mimori had nonchalantly approached the bed and touched something to the girl’s lips.

The instant the man in the white gown and the others realized that the device resembling scuba gear was actually a military gas mask, violet mist blew in from the ceiling with incredible force. The miasma blanketed the enclosed room in an instant, robbing the soldiers of their vision.

“Anesthetic gas...?!?”

Coughing, the man went down on his knees. The room was equipped with anesthetic gas dispensers to keep its vampire occupant from going on a rampage. Mimori Akatsuki had deployed the devices against them.

“You hijacked the lab security system?! Why on earth would you...?!?”

The man yelped in shock before he tumbled to the floor.

The soldiers wielding needle guns were also taken out of commission before they could open fire. It was only because they’d been so vigilant about the girl that they hadn’t responded in time to the mist gushing in from the ceiling.

Although anesthetic gas for anti-vampire purposes had relatively little effect on human beings, its potent muscle-relaxant effect made it a powerful tool for temporarily rendering someone immobile.

That Mimori Akatsuki had hijacked the lab system was not some great shock in itself. She was both a psychometer and the chief of MAR’s medical branch. She of all people could slip past the strictest of passwords and could probably

forged her own cellular construction to defeat any bio-scan.

The question was this: Why had she betrayed MAR?

Refusing to answer the man's question, Mimori extended a hand to the blond girl.

"Let us be off, Sleeping Princess—we're ditching this lab."

The girl stepped down from the bed barefoot, led by the same hand that had placed the gas mask on her.

Mimori guided her along as they escaped from the glass cage enveloped in violet miasma.

"Wh-where art...thou taking me, Healer Who Sees the Past?"

The girl asked that question as the pair ran through a long, labyrinth-like corridor.

"To the Altar of The Cleansing—Itogami Island."

Removing her own gas mask, Mimori looked back at the girl and gave this reply.

A siren echoed throughout the building. Armed security pods patrolling around the corridors had detected their escape and gathered together to bar their path.

About the size of a trash can, the cylindrical robots' pastel exteriors clashed with the rugged machine guns they were equipped with.

But before they could train their barrels on the girls, jolts of electricity penetrated one of the machines' chassis.

The girl heard slightly delayed gunshots as fragments of a shattered glass window danced like snowflakes.

Sparks scattered from the security pod as a bullet sent it flying; it collided with the corridor wall, and its movements came to a halt.

A bullet hole had been punched through the very center of the pod.

Outside the window, on the rooftop of an unrelated building some four to five hundred meters away, she saw a figure holding a massive anti-materiel rifle: a

middle-aged man wearing a loose-fitting shirt who had a languid air about him.

This man had sniped the pod, saving both the girl and Mimori.

With a series of shots from his rifle, he continued to pummel through one pod after another.

Mimori was undoubtedly convinced that the sniper would protect them. Calmly slipping past the wrecked pods, she headed toward the building's exit.

This was a giant research facility known as Demon Beast Park. The canal coursing between the various buildings made the latter seem like the eyes of a net.

A single motorboat was floating upon the canal's watery surface.

Mimori entered the vehicle without the slightest hesitation. *Come, come* went her beckoning hand to the girl.

"For Kojou's sake, we need you. Avrora Florestina, would you lend us your strength?"

As she started up the boat's engine, Mimori looked at the hesitant girl and posed that question to her.

With a gasp, the girl lifted her face, nodding firmly.

"V...very well...!"

After responding with a quivering voice that contrasted with her grandiose language, she timidly jumped into the boat.

Gazing upon the frightened girl, Mimori hummed, "Mmm-hmmm," smiling.

"...Oh, right. I'll give you this. You must be hungry after just waking up, yes?"

With a rustle, Mimori rummaged around the driver's seat of the boat and brought out a small cooler. Mixed in with a large quantity of dry ice, it was packed full of ice cream bars in a variety of colors.

Taking one among them, the girl—Avrora—pleasantly smiled for the first time.

"Delicious."

Their boat kicked up white sea spray as it accelerated along the canal at night.

This was a minor, quiet incident that occurred in the background of the Electoral War— So, too, was it the beginning of the end of the tale of the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki.

CHAPTER ONE
AN AWFUL MORNING

CHAPTER ONE

AN AWFUL MORNING

1

A quiet predawn breeze blew across the reflective surface of the sea.

Against the background of the faint white glow of the water's horizon hovered the mirage-like shadow of a city.

This place was called Itogami Island. It was an artificial isle constructed from carbon fiber, resin, metallic alloys, and sorcery, floating on the Pacific Ocean.

A single demon beast spread its enormous wings, gliding atop the air currents as it approached the heavily mechanized city. It was a dragon covered in metallic scales.

“—Reverberate.”

A Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency riding atop the creature's back—Shio Hikawa—chanted the incantation with a solemn tone of voice.

Drawing spell tablets from her breast pocket, she transformed them into seabirds one after another, whereupon they took flight.

These were simplified *shikigami* possessing no combat capabilities. Their uptime was also short, but it was plenty for reconnaissance purposes.

The materials she'd used to craft the spell tablets by hand weren't proper gear from the Lion King Agency but instead store-bought ink and paper. That was why the seabirds' silhouettes somehow looked like scribbles. Shio had a hard time with making spell tablets—or rather, with aesthetics in general.

Nevertheless, they faithfully obeyed Shio's commands and approached Itogami Island.

Through borrowing her familiars' vision, she would be able to ascertain the state of the island. That was her objective.

She would have loved to locate Kojou Akatsuki's whereabouts, then set off to rendezvous with him as soon as possible, but—

The instant that desire crept into her thoughts, pain resembling static electricity grated against her nerves.

The *shikigami* she'd sent out had come under attack. Since Shio was the caster, the impact of the blow had transferred to her.

After the first one fell apart, it was all downhill from there. In less than thirty seconds, every last one of the twenty *shikigami* under her control were shot down and annihilated.

"Shio...?!" asked Yui Haba, looking back to see Shio staggering and moaning in pain.

Yui was cute but earnest-looking and an excellent Sword Shaman to boot; Shio was proud to have her as a partner. To reassure her gentle-hearted best friend, Shio forced herself to smile back.

"I'm just a little numb. No problem...but this is a bind. Itogami Island's airspace is filled with sorcerers' familiars. Slipping *shikigami* past them without getting spotted might not be possible."

"That figures, with the Dominion armies coming and all."

Mindful of the sea breeze putting her forelocks askew, Yui glared at Itogami Island as it floated on the sea.

Yeah, Shio nodded. Then she shifted her eyes toward the final passenger.

Supported in Yui's embrace while straddling the dragon's back was a small, blond, blue-eyed girl.

Actually, it would be closer to the truth to say she wasn't straddling so much as desperately clinging to the dragon to avoid being thrown off.

The girl was wearing a baggy, hooded coat. For some reason, she had a Saikai Academy uniform on underneath it.

Seeing her body shrunken in fear like that, no one would think her the World's Mightiest Vampire—or at least a single portion of him.

Shio and Yuiri, her escorts, felt like they could scarcely believe it themselves.

“Avrora, are you all right?”

“Uu,” went the girl, trembling slightly as Yuiri swiftly stroked her back.

“Th-this chaotic...shaking is...”

The girl wove her words with a pained, broken voice.

Looking back, Yuiri saw that her face was pale, and her blue eyes seemed lost and adrift. The rumbling of the dragon's back must have made her dizzy and queasy. In other words, she was car—dragon-sick.

“Just hang in there a little longer. How about you try loosening your skirt? And try to look as far into the distance as you can.”

“...Under...stood...”

Raising a voice so frail it threatened to vanish that very moment, the girl drooped, slouching her shoulders.

Since she was seated in front of everyone else, she would most certainly take down everyone with her if she vomited. For that reason, Yuiri nursed the girl with a look of deadly seriousness. Somehow, the dragon the girls were riding—Glenda—seemed a bit concerned.

“The last Kaleid Blood...huh?”

Gazing at the limp, dragon-sick girl with conflicting feelings, Shio unwittingly mumbled this to herself.

This was Avrora Florestina—the twelfth Kaleid Blood.

Such was the name granted to her. A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, part of the World's Mightiest Vampire, was sealed inside her body.

Shio and the others were heading to Itogami Island, which had transformed into a perilous battlefield, to link up Avrora with Kojou Akatsuki wherever he might be.

However, Shio quickly began to regret having accepted the role.

It wasn't because she was unreliable. Of course, that wasn't to say she lacked uncertainty altogether, but if anything, what Shio felt was a vague sense of fear.

No one knew what would happen when the awakened Aurora came into contact with Kojou Akatsuki. Perhaps her existence might be the trigger for some kind of irrevocable calamity.

On top of that, conditions on Itogami Island were far from normal. It was at the height of the Electoral War—and now that all the primogenitors were gathered, it had turned into an extremely dangerous zone, a veritable powder keg.

The prospect of tossing the last Kaleid Blood into that mess made her wonder if she was tossing a defenseless little fish into a tank full of hungry sharks.

A tiny fish that just might be carrying enough poison to contaminate that entire region of the ocean.

"Say, Yui. I wonder, is it really all right to bring this girl and Kojou Akatsuki together?"

Lowering her voice so that Aurora wouldn't overhear, Shio whispered into Yui's ear.

Yui nodded solemnly, as if to say, *I was concerned about the very same thing.*

"Yeah, it's kinda worrying... Aurora is really cute and all."

"Cu...te?"

The unexpected praise from her best friend struck Shio by surprise, causing her to let out her voice like a complete idiot.

For her part, Yui's eyes seemed to glimmer with delight for some reason.

"I've always found it strange, you know. I was like, why haven't Kojou and Yukii hooked up?"

"Hooked up? Yukina Himeragi is Kojou Akatsuki's watcher, you know? Fraternization... Wouldn't that be...indiscreet?"

"What are you talking about, Shio? Duty is duty, and romance is romance. I

mean hooking up with someone would be hugely advantageous for observing him!”

“Er, something like that isn’t an issue of advantage or disadvantage.”

“I mean, think about it. This is Yukii. He enjoys the company of that adorable creature twenty-four hours a day. It would be impossible to NOT fall in love, right? No way could I hold out if it were me. I’d be proposing to her and scheduling a marriage venue on day one.”

“...You’re turning into Kirasaka, Yuiri.”

Shio sighed, chiding her best friend as the latter breathed raggedly.

“Himeragi is certainly pretty, but the two not dating shouldn’t be any surprise. She has a right to choose her significant other herself, and there might be other people Kojou Akatsuki likes as well—”

“Yes! That’s it, Shio!”

Yuri seemed worked up as she shouted, thrusting a pointing finger straight at her friend’s nose.

“Eh?”

“I mean the part about Kojou liking other girls.”

Yuri drew her face close to Shio’s, conveying this in a tiny voice. Glancing to the side, she fixated the tip of her gaze on Avrora’s curled back.

“...You’re not saying she’s the one Kojou Akatsuki is in love with?”

“The odds are pretty high, right?”

“I mean, well...they were close enough she passed on the abilities of the Fourth Primogenitor to him...”

Shio folded her arms, staring at Avrora.

To the average person, this prone blond girl suffering from motion sickness would seem beautiful and utterly harmless.

According to the Lion King Agency’s files, Kojou Akatsuki had apparently spent roughly half a year with her from autumn of his third year in middle school onward.

Shio and Yuiri didn't know about the pair's relationship during that time. But if one went by Yuiri's prior line, Shio found it unnatural for Kojou Akatsuki to spend half a year with an adorable creature such as this and not fall in love for her.

At the very least, there was no mistaking that Aurora was extremely partial to him. Otherwise, there was no way he would have become the Fourth Primogenitor.

"This really is bad, huh..."

Yuii murmured this in an atypically serious tone.

"Hm? What is?"

Shio prompted back with a questioning look. Aurora and Kojou Akatsuki having a good relationship was hardly a bad thing for them. With Itogami Island currently under the Order of the End's occupation, they should have welcomed the opportunity for less fuss and muss with open arms.

However, Yuii seemed even more distressed as she lowered her eyes.

"I mean, if Kojou and Aurora become an item, won't that break Yuii's heart?"

"B-break her heart? But we don't know for sure that Himeragi likes Kojou Akatsuki yet, right?"

Shio's shaken voice went shrill as she made that rational assertion. Yuii shook her head, exasperated.

"What are you talking about, Shio? It couldn't be more obvious."

"Is—is that so?"

"There's no doubt whatsoever. You can't fool a Sword Shaman's intuition."

"R-right..."

Somehow, the other woman's conviction clicked with Shio.

Then Yuii made a tiny sigh.

"Think about it. Think how Yuii would feel, having to watch Kojou once he and Aurora are joined as a happy couple."

“Th-that certainly does seem cruel...”

Shio pressed a hand to her chest as a terribly painful feeling came over her.

She could picture Yukina staring at Avrora and Kojou Akatsuki with melancholy eyes once they'd become a couple. In that mental image, she seemed less watcher and more...stalker.

“On top of that, since we're the ones bringing Avrora to Itogami Island, she might think we're directly responsible for that...!”

“Ghh...”

Writhing as Yuiri's words tossed her an anchor, Shio somehow managed to put her feelings in order.

“Th-that doesn't mean we can't just stop and not make her meet Kojou Akatsuki! Relying on him is the only way to put an end to this Electoral War mess...!”

“Uuu...you might be right... The Blood is bad enough as it is, and now we have all the primogenitors gathered here, too. I don't know what to do anymore...”

At a loss, Yuiri shifted her face toward the heavens.

On top of the Order of the End, commanded by The Blood, Itogami Island was also under occupation by the primogenitors forming the three pillars of Demonkind and their respective military forces. As things stood now, it would be impossible for the Lion King Agency to produce a breakthrough in this situation, even if they invested all their combat capabilities into trying.

No matter the danger, and no matter the unhappiness visited upon Yukina Himeragi, they had no choice but to depend on the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

As Shio muttered this to herself, Glenda's huge body suddenly trembled with fright. At some point, they'd arrived at a spot from which they could make out Itogami Island's buildings with their naked eyes.

Despite the fact it was prior to dawn, birds were dancing in the sky above the island.

To be exact, they were things that merely resembled birds.

Some were flying demon beasts that should not have existed in Japan. Others were airborne creatures produced from magic spells. They comprised a horde of familiars belonging to sorcerers fighting in the Electoral War. These were what had shot down Shio's *shikigami*.

"Glenda, lower your altitude! Take the indirect path through the New Itogami Island ruins to hide your route!"

"Dah—!"

Yuri swiftly issued commands. The dragon sent a short roar back in a high-pitched voice that clashed with its huge, steel-colored body.

During that time, Shio drew out new spell tablets, chanting multiple invocations at once.

The six spell tablets changed into six seabirds that soared upward, surrounding Glenda in the process.

Each of the seabirds held a tiny crystal fragment in its beak. Using those crystals as catalysts, Shio deployed a barrier. She was performing a ritual that fused flying *shikigami* with a moving obstruction. Although this high-level spell was virtually unprecedented, using multiple rituals in parallel was Shio's personal specialty.

"This is stealth-type ritual camouflage...?"

Yuri let out a gasp of admiration as she gazed at the seabird familiars soaring around them.

The barrier Shio had deployed obstructed people's visual recognition. It would allow them to conceal Glenda's form on her approach to Itogami Island. Shamanic War Dancers had developed it for the Lion King Agency to use during assassination missions.

"Yeah. But even if it blocks people's vision, it won't have any effect on familiars or cameras on drones. We have to rely on your eyes for those, Yuri."

"Got it. Leave it to me."

With a firm nod, Yuri drew out a spell tablet of her own. As a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, she possessed the Spirit Sight, an ability that let her

peer into the immediate future. With this, she could shoot down the drones before being spotted, allowing Glenda to slip through the surveillance net in the sky above Itogami Island. This was the operation Yuiri and Shio had thought up for infiltrating Itogami Island. It was a rash plan with many uncertainties, but this was the only way they could arrive on Itogami Island without Aurora's presence being detected.

"Let's go, Glenda...quietly, 'kay?"

Yuri called out to the dragon with a tense tenor to her voice.

"*Dah*," went Glenda's brief reply as she slowly turned about.

They were several kilometers away from Itogami Island proper. The warehouse district on the coast was clearly visible, even to the naked eye.

But the familiars flying overhead were increasing in number as well.

Shio focused on maintaining the ritual spell camouflage, while Yuri squinted toward thin air. Perhaps their tension was transferring to their companion, for Aurora's body clenched and stiffened as well.

Glenda, however, somehow seemed to be enjoying herself as she swayed her enormous body and skimmed the water's surface. Maybe she thought of the situation like playing hide-and-seek out on a picnic.

"Incoming...!"

Noticing a horde of familiars approaching, Shio put more strength into her fingers to keep the ritual barrier held together.

The demon beasts resembled huge eagles and owls and had wingspans between two and three meters. Their sharp talons and horns indicated that they could fight just as well as they could soar through the skies. They were probably familiars of well-known sorcerers.

The familiars went right past Glenda's huge frame as the trio slipped by.

For an instant, Shio was too tense to breathe—

Ultimately, however, the demon beasts never noticed the dragon's presence thanks to the ritual camouflage.

In subsequent encounters, other creatures passed over Shio and the others without noticing them. Their success wasn't solely on Shio's barrier. It was Glenda's ability to fly through the sky without scattering heat, demonic energy, or a single sound around her that also made pulling the wool over their eyes possible.

"Those emblems... They're from the Fallen Dynasty Sorcery Corps...!"

By observing the forms of the familiars zooming by, Shio had deduced their master's identity.

A creepy symbol was engraved on each demonic beast's collar: six eyes placed in circular patterns. Apparently, this was the unit insignia of the Sorcery Corps under the direct command of Fallgazer, the Second Primogenitor.

It was obvious that the place they'd chosen as their landing point was under the Fallen Dynasty's rule.

While they wouldn't have been able to survey the area via *shikigami* beforehand, this was the absolute worst scenario they could have stumbled into. Even among the three Dominions, the Fallen Dynasty was the nation most shrouded in mystery, and the Japanese government had virtually no interaction with it. Aside from the Second Primogenitor being someone with a moody personality, Shio and Yuri completely lacked any knowledge of it.

They didn't have a clue how anyone would negotiate their release if the Second Primogenitor captured them.

"Minus ten seconds! UAV two kilometers in front!"

Yuri's sharp cry disrupted Shio's distressed hypothetical. There was nothing in the airspace before their eyes. However, Yuri had made out an unmanned aerial vehicle that would appear there ten seconds hence with her Spirit Sight.

"Got it. Let's get a little dramatic!"

Shio drew a silver recurve bow from the instrument case on her back. Nocking a ritual arrow into place, she pulled the drawstring.

"—Let there...be light!"

The ritual arrow that Shio loosed composed a giant magic circle in the middle

of the sky. It instantly unleashed incredible, thunderbolt-like rays of light. A dazzling orb suddenly appeared in midair, then enveloped the UAV that came flying in, jamming its internal electronic devices. As the magical energy flew apart with a roar, it snagged the attention of all the familiars on patrol nearby.

Using that opening, Glenda busted through the surveillance net, penetrating Itogami Island's airspace in an instant.

"We slipped through!"

Confirming that things were clear as far as she could see, Shio let out a sigh of relief.

Looking down, she noticed Island North's warehouse district drawing closer. If they could slip into the shadows of the buildings, they wouldn't need to worry about the familiars' surveillance anymore.

"I'm so glad—...good work, Glenda!"

As if to reward the steel-colored dragon, Yui gave her a stroke on the neck.

However, the beast made no reply. Instead, she folded her enormous wings and suddenly accelerated. Shaken by the unexpected plummet, Aurora shrieked with a "Hii!"

"G-Glenda... What's wrong, Glenda?!" asked Yui in bewilderment, on the verge of falling off.

The next moment, a shroud fell over their vision.

"Wha...?!"

As Glenda glided through the sky, a huge silhouette danced above Shio and the others' heads, practically on top of them.

It was a fantastically shaped bird.

The creature's enormous body rivaled that of a dragon. It had the efficient wings characteristic of birds of prey and a spectacular tail resembling that of a peacock. But its ferocious, bestial hind legs were more like a lion's, and its head resembled a fearsome canine.

"The Simurgh?! What's such an impossibly rare divine bird doing in a place

like this?!”

Shio’s voice quivered with shock.

The Simurgh was a legendary demon beast said to dwell in the Spirit Mountains of the Middle East. It was the king of all avian creatures, possessing great intelligence and an immortal body; apparently, almost no one had ever caught a glimpse of it.

An unfamiliar figure was on the back of that proud, immortal divine bird.

They were small, poorly matched to the demon beast they rode as a mount.

By appearance, the figure looked in their teens at most—virtually no different from Shio or Yuiri.

In spite of this, they exuded an overwhelming sense of presence.

The figure wore a magnificent dress of crimson and gold. She had long violet hair tied in pigtails, with a refined visage and fair skin.

Her blood-colored eyes narrowed with delight as she smiled.

It was a smile filled with bloodlust and joy, so disturbing that none seeing it could fail to be aghast.

2

“First, for slipping past my Sorcery Corps, allow me to praise...you.”

With a laugh and a lighthearted tone of voice, the girl on the back of the divine bird spoke.

Mysteriously, even though Shio and the others were flying at high speed, they could hear her voice with perfect clarity.

But it was her statement that shook Shio far more than that. She had identified the Sorcery Corps of the Fallen Dynasty as *hers*.

“A metallic dragon, plus Attack Mage girls... A rather amusing combin...ation. Most interest...ing.”

She raised her right hand aloft as she praised them with an innocent smile on

her lips.

The next instant, a crimson mist enveloped her entire body—a miasma of fresh blood imbued with dense demonic energy.

The spreading blood mist distorted in thin air and filled their vision, then took on the form of countless beasts. These masses of demonic energy were so dense as to possess sentience—a vampire's Beast Vassals.

“Beast Vassals?!”

“She summoned that many all by herself...?!”

Yui and Shio exclaimed this simultaneously.

The Beast Vassals resembled prehistoric winged dinosaurs. Their numbers cleared a hundred with ease. Compared to Glenda in her dragon form, their frames felt on the small side, but since they were collections of demonic energy, size didn't correlate at all with their combat prowess. Besides, there were simply too many of them. There was no need to even try to calculate the difference in combat strength. It was clear at a glance they had no chance of winning in a straight-up fight.

“Avrora, hold on tight!”

“I-indeed...!”

Taking heed of Yui's warning, Avrora desperately clung to Glenda's back.

At almost the exact same moment, the dragon engaged in highly acrobatic evasive maneuvers.

At this juncture, their precious ritual spell camouflage was worthless. Shio released the barrier, using its spiritual energy to scatter as many *shikigami* as she could create instead. As far as she was concerned, no matter how little they helped, the more chaff thrown up against the demon beasts, the better.

“Rosen Chevalier Plus, Boot Up—!”

Drawing her beloved sword from her back, Yui turned toward the direction of Glenda's advance and swung her blade downward.

Rosen Chevalier Plus, which used ritual magic to rend space itself, was one of

the few divine armaments effective against vampiric Beast Vassals. She shot down one of the winged dinosaurs circling in front, which allowed Glenda to break through the encirclement by force.

“Hurry, Glenda!”

“Dah!!”

Not even waiting for Shio to speak, the dragon earnestly flapped her wings to shake off the demon beasts’ pursuit. Since they weren’t bound by the laws of physics, however, the Beast Vassals’ speed proved overwhelmingly superior. They surrounded Shio and the others more and more, barring their escape route.

At this rate, it would be only a matter of time until they were captured—the instant Shio thought that, Glenda roared.

“Wh-what the...?!”

“Glenda?!”

She let out a cry that sounded like a girl’s shriek, sending Shio and Yuiri into confusion. Up to that point, she’d never screamed that way while in dragon form.

But she hadn’t just let loose a shout. In response to the dragon’s roar, space shimmered, then a steely shadow spread forth from out of nowhere.

Pouring out of that shadow was a new horde of demon beasts.

They were grotesque monsters with heads resembling those of hornets and bodies like serpents, plus wyvern-like wings. They belonged to a new genus of demon beast whose existence had yet to be announced to the world—but Shio and Yuiri knew their names.

After all, they had encountered identical demon beasts once before.

“H-houda?!”

“Don’t tell me, she summoned them from Nod...?!”

Yuri and Shio were beside themselves as they gazed at the horde of creatures that had suddenly manifested.

At the bottom of Kannawa Lake in Tangiwa, these demon beasts from Nod had protected the sealed Glenda—and now the dragon had summoned a fresh horde of them after falling into peril.

Shio and Yuiri hadn't noticed until this very moment that their mount possessed this ability. In fact, it was highly probable that Glenda herself hadn't known.

Although her letting them loose wasn't a cause for celebration, there was no doubt whatsoever the emergence of the houda at that very moment had saved the trio.

While the demon beasts fought the houda, Glenda was approaching Itogami Island's urban areas. If she could hide in the shadows of the buildings, even Beast Vassals would have a hard time keeping up with her. If the girl launched indiscriminate attacks enveloping urban areas that might be another story, but short of that, this had to be their chance to escape.

"Shio! That bridge!"

"I get it...! Glenda, please!"

When Yuiri pointed at a bridge spanning the canal inside Itogami City, it was all Shio needed to know exactly what she was planning.

To shake off the demon beasts pursuing them, the steel-colored dragon dived as far as the surface of the canal all at once. Kicking up water spray in place of a smoke screen, she crept under the huge bridge.

"Glenda! Revert!"

"Daaaaaaahh!"

The instant she hid under the main girder, Yuiri gave the signal for Glenda to release her dragon form.

Her wings vanished into thin air, and her tail was enveloped by a silver twinkle as it, too, faded away. Then her huge body precipitously shrank and transformed into the figure of a naked girl. Of course, this meant everyone riding tilted forward as they were cast into the air. It was like going from a drop to an almost dead stop before switching to a rise, but the blow was pronounced

nonetheless. They lost their breaths from the drop and the sudden deceleration.

“Hold on, Aurora Florestina!”

Using physical enchantment to boost her strength to its limit, Shio supported Aurora as the latter almost went flying. In turn, Yui wrapped Glenda in an identical embrace, before making a heavy landing atop the foot of the bridge.

“Urk...let there be shadow—!”

Although her bones and tendons rippled with unpleasant sounds, Shio ignored them as she instantly began unleashing spell tablets. Pouring the scant remainder of her spiritual energy into it, she created a large *shikigami*.

This familiar adopted the form of a mock dragon like Glenda, then flew out from under the bridge in Shio’s and the others’ stead. Acting as a decoy to draw away the other demonic beasts, it proceeded to fly over the ocean.

“Are you hurt, Aurora...?”

Letting out short, ragged breaths, Shio asked that of the blond-haired vampire in her arms.

“N...no tortuous fall from heaven may harm mine flesh...”

Aurora coughed weakly as she replied, her almost-inaudible tone contrasting with her elaborate vocabulary. As demons went, vampires were far from the stoutest. And since she hadn’t received training of any kind, the reckless, abrupt deceleration she’d just spoken of must have been a considerable burden.

“I’m glad. Glenda’s all right, too, huh.”

Confirming that the demon beasts had passed them by, Yui let out a sigh of relief.

She was grimacing ever so slightly from dropping on a maintenance landing under the bridge. Her leg hurt from when she’d cushioned Glenda upon impact.

“Yui, your leg...”

Realizing that her friend was dragging her right leg, a look of worry came over Glenda.

Yuiiri put her own school blazer over Glenda while giving her a strong smile.

“I’m all right; it’s just a minor twist. More importantly, we have to get out of here fast.”

“Yeah...but it doesn’t seem like they’ll let us go that easily.”

Shio bit her lip as she looked behind them.

Mixed in with the sound of the wind blowing under the bridge was a faint flapping of wings and a jeering voice.

“You will not get...away.”

The voice of the girl in the red dress made Shio and Yuiiri reflexively draw their weapons.

Dancing from the skies above, the Simurgh elegantly came to a quiet stop, hovering above the canal water’s surface.

The figure sitting sideways atop its back broke into a bewitching grin. Though the decoy *shikigami* had fooled the demon beasts, apparently their master wasn’t so easily fooled.

“Dragon of the Swamp, familiar of Cain the Sinful God, to think we would meet in such a...place.”

The girl in the red dress stared at Glenda, the corners of her shapely lips rising like those of a cat.

The former dragon’s silvery hair seemed to stand on end as she glared at the girl to intimidate her. But it was readily apparent that this was nothing more than a hollow threat.

“I guess the houda from earlier made her take interest in Glenda, huh?”

“We’re lucky she didn’t notice Avrora instead.”

Yuiiri replied to Shio’s murmur with a tiny voice.

I wonder, went Shio as she twisted her lips. Certainly, the girl in the red dress had yet to notice Avrora’s presence. But if she captured Shio and the others here, it amounted to the same thing. It was only a matter of time before her identity would be exposed.

However, Yuiri was thinking along different lines than Shio.

“Sorry, Shio. Glenda and I will be decoys and buy time. While we’re doing that, take Aurora and run.”

“Yuri?!”

Shio looked at the face of her best friend in surprise.

“No! There’s no way I can let you...!”

“You mustn’t forget our objective. It’s to take her to Kojou, right?”

“Ghh...”

Yuri’s calm assertion left Shio’s words caught in her throat.

Let everyone get captured right then and there or have only Shio and Aurora escape—there was really only a single option. To allow Aurora to escape safely, the moment when the girl in the red dress’s focus was trained upon Glenda was their sole opportunity.

“Are you done...conversing? Do make this...entertaining.”

The girl in the red dress mischievously inquired, as though mocking Shio’s melancholy.

Spreading both arms wide, a mist of fresh blood enveloped the girl once more. The miasma then transformed into new Beast Vassals, which dropped to the ground and surrounded Shio and company.

Shio wondered if it was right to compare them to birds walking on two legs. It would probably be more accurate to say they resembled deinonychus or the velociraptor.

Each Beast Vassals’ body length was under three meters. However, they were easily more than two hundred strong in number.

“Don’t tell me... Are these all her Beast Vassals...?!”

Shio felt dizzy from sheer despair.

Vampires weren’t limited to one Beast Vassal a person. The Fourth Primogenitor had twelve Beast Vassals. It was said that Ki Juranbarada, the First Primogenitor, was served by no less than seventy-two.

But the amount of Beast Vassals that the girl had summoned before their eyes was literally on another level.

This was different than a single Beast Vassal divided into pieces, like Velesh Aradahl's Ghoul.

No, this was a horde of Beast Vassals in the hundreds, and each member possessed its own complete sentience so they could hunt based on individual judgment. And this girl was able to summon and freely control them all by herself.

The vast, off-the-charts amount of demonic energy she exuded made her identity crystal clear.

This was Fallgazer—

Aswadguhl Aziz, the Second Primogenitor, ruler of the Dominion known as the Fallen Dynasty.

"Don't, Yui...! She's—no, that lord is—"

"Go, Shio! Quickly!"

Shielding Glenda behind her back, Yui hurled a silver spell tablet and turned it into a *shikigami*. As the familiar took the form of a wolf, the bewildered Shio and Aurora mounted its back and set off running.

She'd turned her blade against the Beast Vassals of a vampire primogenitor—of course, Yui had to have understood the implications of that. Even so, the two girls had remained behind so that Shio and Aurora might escape.

"Dah!!"

Glenda transformed into a dragon once more to hold the horde of Beast Vassals in check. Perhaps she was trying to summon another mob of hounds. Cloaked in the shadow of the enormous dragon, the silver *shikigami* Shio and Aurora rode sprinted off, climbing over the embankment to slip into the warehouse district along the coastline.

A large explosion echoed. Shio no longer had any idea what was happening behind them.

"Shio Hikawa...I..."

Head beneath a hood, the vampire girl swayed on the *shikigami*'s back as she raised a quiet voice. She probably felt responsible for leaving Yuiri and Glenda behind as they fled.

"It's fine, Aurora."

Still tightly clenching a fist, Shio put her other hand on the girl's shoulder.

"It's Yuiri. She'll be all right... She'll be all right."

Murmuring these words as if trying to convince herself of that, Shio steered the familiar Yuiri had entrusted to her as they continued to escape.

A cold, hazy morning's mist enveloped the girls in white.

3

The lightening sky poked through the gaps of the shut curtains.

It was a small classroom in a section of Saikai Academy, a clubroom for the Demon Sanctuary Research Club, or Dem-Club for short.

Roused from her nap, Asagi Aiba, wearing a gym suit in place of a nightgown, sipped on some banana juice and watched the video feeds on PC monitors that filled up an entire wall.

The screens were displaying a local Itogami Island comedian. The morning talk show they were on had changed its programming to do a special broadcast on the Electoral War.

"So let's begin the show where you get your Itogami Island Electoral War news faster than anywhere else, Electoral War Digest— Yes, today's topic is none other than the vampire primogenitors and rulers of the Dominions joining the fray. And what a surprise that is."

After the comedian babbling in a needlessly high-energy voice passed off the topic, a university professor taking the role of commentator started speaking.

"I suppose you're correct. Five months ago, the Third Primogenitor met envoys from the CSA face-to-face, but the last time the First Primogenitor's presence was confirmed was during the Fourth Dnieper Conflict some eight years ago. It's

actually been twenty-two years since the Second Primogenitor has been in foreign lands.”

“Can we take that to mean this Electoral War is just that important?”

“Yes. This is not an issue of a single Demon Sanctuary called Itogami Island, but rather it is likely the turning point that will determine the world’s power balance going forward.”

“Wow, that’s heavy. So this really is a conflict that the whole world is watching. Without further ado, I’d like to show you the ruler rankings. First, there’s been a major shake-up in grade C group two—”

Gazing at the music chart-style show as it introduced the various ruler candidates, Asagi sipped longingly at her now-empty juice box.

“...What’s he going on about? We’re the ones caught up in all this. Who cares about the rest of the world?”

“Keh-keh... Well, don’t say that, li’l miss. It’s really only the demons punching it out in the Electoral War, so to most of the regular subjects, it’s someone else’s problem.”

Hovering in a corner of each monitor was an avatar shaped like a badly sewn teddy bear, mouthing off to her with a rather sardonic tone. Asagi sullenly knit her brows.



“It’s not someone else’s problem at all, sheesh. Who knows when someone’ll be blown away by a stray bullet?”

“Flip that on its head, an’ it means stray bullets are the only thing they got to worry about. If you think of it as a slightly rambunctious festival, it’s hard for them to get worked up about it. Hell, if these people had nerves so sensitive that this much bothered ’em, I don’t think they’d be livin’ in a Demon Sanctuary to begin with.”

“Uu...well, that might be true but...”

Asagi vaguely beat around the bush.

Mogwai, the badly sewn teddy bear, had spoken the truth. Now on their fourth morning of the Electoral War, the trouble-accustomed residents of Itogami Island had begun quickly acclimating to the situation.

Enterprises and stores had closed for business without warning, but MAR had announced it would compensate them for profits lost during that time, along with insuring the full cost of any homes destroyed in the ensuing violence.

It was inconvenient not to be able to walk around at night, but on the flipside, the tangible damage didn’t extend much beyond that.

The Electoral War system had been set up so that the risk of harm to ordinary civilians without a will to fight was low. Since the residents inside each domain were the source of the ruler candidates’ power, courting their displeasure would result in the demonic energy provided by the demon registration bracelets to be cut off, which would put them at an immediate disadvantage.

On the other hand, even if an enemy force invaded your domain, so long as gaining new subjects was the objective, the interlopers could scarcely afford to harm the general populace. Thanks to the residents’ ability to freely alter their “recommended ruler,” they could not be suppressed through fear.

The ruler candidates were not in a contest for territory but for the support of the people living there—in other words, the Electoral War was a sort of popularity contest. Even the primogenitors, who possessed inexhaustible demonic energy to begin with, were superficially obeying the rules of the Electoral War, at least for the time being.

Understanding all of this, the residents had begun not merely quietly observing the Electoral War but seeing it as a game to be enjoyed to the fullest. The winner of the Electoral War became the subject of betting—and T-shirts, acrylic charms, and similar goods related to popular rulers had swiftly begun making the rounds in the marketplace.

And more than all of that, numerous sorcery-related corporations had pushed into the information-gathering field to obtain lucrative data from demons locked in mutual combat. That's just how the Demon Sanctuary rolled.

"...So what's the actual situation like right now?"

Asagi was crushing the tip of her straw between her teeth as she posed the question.

Mogwai gave an amused *keh-keh* laugh and switched one of the monitors to a map of Itogami Island's urban landscape.

Divided into colorful regions, the map had undergone a great change since the day before.

"After all, we've got the vampire primogenitors throwing in. The small, weak domains below C rank have had their subjects completely overtaken, so they're basically destroyed."

"Ahh—...well, you'd figure that would happen."

Asagi sighed slightly. With the Dominion military forces joining the fray, many ruler candidates must have lost their morale and given up without a fight. As a result, the Electoral War faction map had undergone a massive reorganization before even half a day had passed.

"Most of Island East's main facilities have come under the occupation of the Fallen Dynasty's airship unit. The Second Primogenitor's domain has a tentative ruler ranking of eight. In combat strength alone, it's clearly A-class, but the turf they have in the east doesn't have the pure population numbers for that."

"I don't think they're very worried about rankings, though. With primogenitor-class demonic energy, what they'd suck up from the subjects doesn't even amount to a rounding error."

“That’s how it is. Case in point, the First Primogenitor doesn’t even have his own domain.”

“He doesn’t have a domain?”

Mogwai’s unexpected report made Asagi gasp in disbelief.

“Yeah. The Tensou Academy Domain is treating the First Primogenitor and the Warlord’s Empire unit as guests.”

“Tensou Academy... You mean they’re freeloading off Yume?”

“What in the world is he thinking?” Asagi muttered to herself. Certainly Yume Eguchi, who could control even Leviathan as the Witch of the Night, was powerful; in terms of pure combat ability, however, she was no match for a vampire primogenitor. The First Primogenitor, Ki Juranbarada, surely had no reason to rely on her.

Of course, getting the backing of the First Primogenitor wasn’t exactly a bad deal for Yume but—

“Thanks to that, the Tensou Academy Domain stands as the undisputed leader of the ruler rankings. At this rate, that li’l miss’ll be the next ruler of Itogami Island.”

“Not that I have a problem with that...”

Asagi let out a languid sigh as she spoke.

“And Kasugaya?”

“Our li’l ruler is a tentative fourth place. Part of that comes down to the depletion of combat power of domains in the upper ranks, but managing to repel that Chaos Zone invasion really does seem to have had an effect.”

Mogwai asserted this in a grandiose tone.

The prior evening, around the same time as the Order of the End’s attack, the Dominion under the Third Primogenitor’s command known as the Chaos Zone had declared it was interceding in the Electoral War, beginning its invasion with Island South. It then launched a surprise attack on Itogami Island’s coastline using large submersible aircraft carriers that had surfaced.

Since it was in Island South, Saikai Academy had been at risk. However, the Saikai Academy Domain had the good fortune of having Asagi Aiba, the Priestess of Cain, on campus grounds.

After obtaining permission from Shizuri, the ruler, Asagi had been able to employ a limited version of her Cleansing abilities.

Since Mogwai's powers were split between her and performing calculations, she hadn't been able to hope for The Cleansing to have anything like its real power, which could rival the primogenitors themselves. But even then, it was complete overkill for sending the Chaos Zone's minions packing. Thanks to Rui Miyazumi, Yuno Amase, and Misaki Sasasaki's efforts on top of that, they succeeded in driving the Chaos Zone out of Saikai Academy Domain. They'd managed to protect their own independence.

That being said, Asagi mused with a sigh.

"Even if we drove them back, that was only one unit, right? We don't have any idea what's coming next time. Plus, our ruler, Kasugaya, is still MIA, and who knows how long the Third Primogenitor is going to behave herself..."

"Ahhh, about that Third Primogenitor."

Mogwai spoke in a nonchalant, gossipy tone of voice.

"You have something on her movements?"

Asagi gave the familiar avatar a nakedly wary glare. For some reason, Mogwai's tone sounded almost giddy.

"Yeah. I've finally deduced her whereabouts."

"Where is she?"

"Right outside. She's at the Saikai Academy front gate."

"Haah?!"

Bolting from her seat on reflex, she yanked open the window curtains.

Asagi saw the schoolyard illuminated by the light of dawn.

Standing out in the open in front of the firmly shut gates was a girl with light green hair.

Although the girl had bodyguards, they didn't have even a single weapon on them. That's because her attendants were a pair of leopards.

Noticing Asagi leaning out of the window, the girl—Giada Kukulkin—narrowed her jade eyes and made an oddly amiable wave.

“She told me, ‘Bring out your ruler. I have spare time, so I have come to play.’”

Mogwai delivered this report to Asagi, eager to see how she would react.

Asagi put a hand to her forehead, as though enduring a dizzy spell, and exhaled deeply.

4

The Chaos Zone was an enigmatic Dominion based chiefly in Central America.

The majority of the realm consisted of highlands that were more than ten thousand meters above sea level; it also included vast wastelands and tropical rain forests, plus treacherous mountain ranges that rebuffed invasion by external foes.

On the other hand, it was blessed with an abundance of subterranean resources such as precious metals and crude oil, plus sorcerous natural resources like dragon lines, both of which bolstered its military might. On top of that, the territory's interior contained numerous ruins of the Devas, which had apparently enabled it to develop its own independent branches of magic.

Additionally, it had built up favorable relations with the various demon tribes native to the continent of South America, whose total military might was utterly unknown. They might have been inferior in breadth to the Warlord's Empire or the Fallen Dynasty, but this was why it was widely feared as the Impregnable Dominion.

Its monarch's name was Giada Kukulkin, the Third Primogenitor, otherwise known as the Chaos Bride—

For some reason, this same Giada had come to visit Saikai Academy at the crack of dawn and was now stuffing her cheeks with the cafeteria's breakfast special.

“The dishes in this nation are delicious, but the quantity is slightly lacking.”

Nibbling at eggs on toast, which she’d folded in half, she gave the ketchup on her finger a little lick. For the monarch of a powerful Dominion, she was far more easygoing than you’d think.

“I think so as well, Chaos Bride—”

Sitting right in front of Giada, Asagi put on a strained smile in agreement. Saikai Academy’s campus cafeteria was proud of the cheapness and volume of its menu, but it was a little insufficient for a voracious eater like Asagi.

Fixing her gaze upon her host, the Third Primogenitor raised an eyebrow with deep interest.

“How unexpected. You look upon me yet are not surprised?”

“I have had a prior opportunity to look upon Your Ladyship.”

Asagi replied, choosing her words with great care.

Even though she was an unaging, undying primogenitor, Giada Kukulkin was quite young to the eye. On top of that, she was wearing a school uniform—style miniskirt and blazer. Thanks to her outfit, she didn’t look like anything more than a slightly flamboyant student from overseas at a distance. Surely it wasn’t strange to find that unexpected.

Still, Asagi had little idea what her actual age was.

Giada might have looked like an innocent girl, but she also came off as a mature, seductive woman.

Her long hair was as green as a polished gemstone, and her eyes shone with jade. She had a bestial beauty full of vitality. Asagi felt it was insolent to try and measure the age of a demonic queen by the same standards as human beings.

First and foremost, studying under Natsuki Minamiya had taught Asagi that people whose appearance differed from their chronological age were hardly rare on Itogami Island—that was her impression, at least.

As if reading what was on her mind, Giada made a wry, charming smile.

“I see. But I do not care for that bombastic alias. You, Priestess of Cain, may

call me Giada.”

“You know about me...?”

The fact a vampire primogenitor had grasped the identity of a mere high school girl left Asagi a little shaken.

For her part, Giada seemed exasperated as she burst into a bit of laughter.

“As if I could forget the girl who picked a fight with the Holy Ground Treaty Organization head-on?”

“Ah...er, I’m kind of—sorry about things back then...”

“Why apologize? Those events were truly thrilling. You brought great merriment to me.”

“R-right...”

Asagi nodded vaguely, feeling a little awkward. That sure didn’t seem like a compliment to her.

The two women were sitting across from each other on the cafeteria’s broad, open terrace.

Civilians from the surrounding areas sheltering at Saikai Academy were peeking in on Asagi and Giada’s conversation from the cafeteria windows. Giada didn’t seem to particularly mind. Perhaps she was used to being showered with attention.

The only attendees present at the conversation were Giada’s two leopards, waiting on her right and left. She made a suggestive smile as she looked down at them.

“But to think that an institution of learning would prove to be your territory. No wonder my blood daughters were unable to fell this place. It would have been more amusing if Kojou Akatsuki had been here, though.”

“Er...um, Giada, why did you join the Electoral War now of all times...?”

Suspecting that the conversation was heading toward ominous places, Asagi hastily changed the subject.

During the war of the primogenitors roughly three months prior, it had been

Giada herself who'd first recognized Itogami Island as the Fourth Primogenitor's territory. She couldn't help but think of the woman laying her hands on Itogami Island now as a kind of betrayal.

Giada, however, peered into Asagi's eyes without the slightest shred of guilt.

"One of my goals is you, Priestess of Cain."

"Eh...?!"

"Was it not you who proved that Itogami Island, the Altar of The Cleansing, is a powerful enough weapon to rival the Holy Ground Treaty Organization's multinational armada? This is an opportunity to legally obtain it. I have no reason to watch in silence. The other primogenitors are surely thinking the same thing."

"This is because of...me...?"

Naturally, even Asagi couldn't retain her composure in the face of Giada's assertion, which she never saw coming.

But from one perspective, the logic was obvious. The primogenitors, each ruling their own vast Dominions, had no reason to risk their lives over the right to rule a puny artificial isle in the Pacific. What they wanted wasn't the ruler's throne but Itogami Island, the sorcerous device for The Cleansing.

"Of course, I am not saying that is the only reason. This uproar has granted me, the Warlord, and Fallgazer a rare opportunity to try and kill one another—"

She smiled ferociously as she spoke. To the unaging, undying vampire primogenitors, a lethal contest with life and death as the stakes was the last great pleasure that remained.

Shudder, went her chilled spine as Asagi prompted back with a shaky voice.

"And The Blood...?"

"Mm?"

"Defeating him isn't one of your objectives?"

"Ahhh...you are referring to Kenon, I take it?"

Giada murmured this with a tone of indifference. Asagi grimaced at the

unfamiliar name.

“Kenon...?”

“Number Zero of the Kaleid Bloods—the prototype for the Fourth Primogenitor. There is no need for us to deal with that defective piece of trash. Nor is there any reason for us to care what the likes of him has planned.”

“That’s terrible...!!”

Despite herself, Asagi grew angry at Giada’s dismissive behavior.

If Giada, the Third Primogenitor, stopped The Blood, then Itogami Island’s Electoral War would come to a grinding halt. She had the power, and surely the responsibility, to carry that out.

After all, the other three primogenitors had lent their aid to the construction of the “god-killing weapon” known as the Fourth Primogenitor. If The Blood really was Kaleid Blood Number Zero, Giada wasn’t uninvolved where he was concerned.

The Third Primogenitor comfortably let Asagi’s gaze of reproach wash over her as she laughed.

“Well then, now that my belly is full, let us finally get to the point. Following the customs of this Electoral War, I entreat thee. Priestess of Cain, would you join my forces?”

“You mean for me to become your subject?”

No longer even trying to hide her rage, Asagi glared straight at her.

Giada calmly nodded.

“Indeed. Do this, and I shall guarantee the safety of the people of this domain.”

“I am grateful for your exceedingly generous words.”

Asagi smiled with a frigid expression.

“But I refuse. If you wanted to form a nonaggression pact, that I would think over.”

“Oh really...”

Giada's lips curled in visible delight. Sniffing a provocative air toward their master, the leopards on both of her flanks slowly raised their heads.

"Do you intend to engage the other primogenitors without my protection?"

"Sorry, Giada, but you have two misconceptions."

Asagi stood and put distance between her and Giada. Nevertheless, the two leopards didn't take their eyes off her for a single second.

"First, I'm not a citizen of Saikai Academy Domain. The ruler of this domain is Shizuri Kasugaya. I'm only here as a guest."

"Hmm. Come to think of it, I do recall that being mentioned."

Keeping her legs calmly crossed, Giada glanced at a smartphone she produced from her breast pocket. She was apparently verifying Asagi's statement with an application MAR had provided her with for the Electoral War. Watching a primogenitor operate her own smartphone was quite surreal.

Asagi took out her smartphone as well. But she wasn't aiming to check the Electoral War app. Her smartphone was actually the weapon she wielded as the Priestess of Cain.

"My true ruler is Kojou Akatsuki. I have no reason to accept protection from you."

"Interesting. Then are you going to make an enemy of me here and now, Priestess of Cain?"

A delighted smile came over Giada as she bared her pure-white fangs.

The two leopards on her flanks crouched low in tandem with her.

Their forelegs transformed into lithe female arms.

The metamorphosis was not limited to the arms alone. Their tails vanished, their skeletal structure changed, and their hind legs, torsos, and heads all morphed into humanoid shapes. The beasts had changed into beast people—no, vampires.

Including Giada herself, the vampires from the Third Primogenitor's bloodline in the Chaos Zone were all endowed with the power of transformation. The girls

serving as her bodyguards had used that power to transform themselves into leopards.

The two nimble, leopard-headed vampires sprinted toward Asagi from left and right. Their speed was overwhelming, beyond anything humans could replicate. Asagi couldn't even react to that kind of swiftness.

But the girls weren't able to lay a finger on her.

This was because a small figure in a cook's apron leaped out from behind Asagi to bar their path.

"Branch Number Six from Tiger King Fist Number Four—Skyrend Claw!"

Sprouting bestial ears, the girl—Yuno Amase—slammed demonic energy-infused palm strikes into Giada's underlings. She'd been lurking in the campus cafeteria kitchen so that she could protect Asagi. You could call it a surprise attack that made the most of home domain advantage.

Her armor-penetrating martial technique sent both leopard-headed vampires flying. Still reeling as they landed on their feet, the pair tried to regroup, but this time bullets making nary a sound careened straight through them.

Rui Miyazumi had sniped them from standby atop the campus roof.

He'd blasted them with glue rounds infused with chemical compounds. The flying chemicals from the shot scattered over the entirety of both vampire's bodies, impeding their movements.

Then, as she received Rui's supporting fire, Yuno used the momentum of her surprise attack to launch a strike toward Giada. Or attempted to, rather. But—

"Lion King Fist Number Two—"

"I see, a modern arrangement of kung fu based upon the movements of the Twelve Beasts. You have quite a bit of skill for one so young."

"...Eh?!"

Yuno's lethal blow against Giada, who was still seated in her chair, cut through nothing but air.

Rui's timed snipe shot flying in was also deflected before it reached Giada.

The vast demonic energy available only to vampire primogenitors had become a bulwark to protect her.

Suddenly, the chair Giada had been sitting on softened and sank down to the ground's surface. All at once, she realized that the entirety of the café terrace site had turned into an unknown, swampy environ.

“Nn...?!”

Instantly leaping into the air and abandoning her seat, Giada was assaulted by fresh figures on all sides.

The attackers all bore the same face, that of a young woman wearing a Chinese-style kung fu gi who had donned her dumpling-style hair in a triple braid—Misaki Sasasaki, middle school teacher at Saikai Academy.

The myriad Misaki clones launched countless blunt strikes at Giada from all sides, which turned into beams of light before assaulting her.

This technique was impossible to achieve with afterimages generated from high-speed movement or illusion spells. No, these clones were the real deal, and together they formed an unavoidable attack coming from every direction.

But after a battle that didn't even span a single blink of an eye, it was Misaki who spewed out fresh blood.

“Ms. Sasasaki?! ”

Asagi let out an unmitigated shriek upon seeing Misaki sent flying like a doll and crash into a wall.

The clones vanished, and the swampy scenery returned to the café terrace of old. Misaki, supposedly fallen and coughing up blood everywhere, also vanished from sight as the real, unscathed Misaki appeared right before Giada.

“Divine Mystic Arts... You employ a rare technique, woman.”

Landing as if nothing had happened, the vampire exhaled in a show of admiration.

Misaki dramatically lowered her shoulders, then gave the grin of a child busted for a prank.

“That’s the Third Primogenitor for you; I’d expect nothing less of the ancestor of martial arts. And you even managed to evade the Twenty-Four All-Directional Fists? It’s a completely simultaneous attack from multiple dimensions, though.”

“Yes, to be quite honest, that did take me by surprise. This island has quite the cast of characters gathered on it. I’m rather entertained.”

Giada’s fangs poked out of her little smile.

That moment, a pure-white mist enveloped her body.

The mist was so explosively cold it seemed set to freeze the world itself. In a split second, it encased the café floor, the walls, and even the surrounding air in ice. This ivory miasma was the Beast Vassal of Giada Kukulkin, the Third Primogenitor.

“Very well. Take pride in the fact that you compelled me to employ a Beast Vassal—go, Ixquimilli!”

“—Mogwai, bulwark!”

Asagi angrily shouted into her smartphone. Directly after, a crimson radiance pushed back the cold rushing in like a billowing wave; Asagi had activated the forbidden spell, The Cleansing.

By all rights, The Cleansing was an incantation so great it could rewrite the very order of the world. Asagi, not even a common mage, could only use a fraction of its power, which still didn’t amount to a skimming of its surface. Furthermore, the effects of the Electoral War were greatly constraining the computational capacity of her partner, Mogwai, resulting in rather difficult conditions for sealing the power of a primogenitor’s Beast Vassal.

“This is rough...!”

Mogwai’s complaints trickled out from the speaker of the smartphone. Even with the maximum might that she could draw from the greatly reduced Cleansing, stopping the cold from the Beast Vassal that Giada had summoned would take every last shred.

“A phenomenon-altering barrier, is it? But do you think you can defend against my Beast Vassal alone in your current state?”

Seeing straight through Asagi's limits, Giada asked this of Asagi.

But although Asagi's expression was tense, she wasn't nervous. Even facing off against Giada with the obstruction between them, her tone remained composed to the end as she spoke.

"Giada Kukulkin, this is your second misconception."

"...What?"

"Not all the primogenitors are necessarily our enemies. Saikai Academy is allied with another domain. That's the Tensou Academy Domain to which the First Primogenitor belongs—!"

"The First Primogenitor, you say...?!"

Giada's eyebrows trembled ever so slightly.

As if waiting for that precise moment, a new Beast Vassal appeared above her head, a long sword with a serrated, wiry, whiplike blade. This was an Intelligent Weapon-type Beast Vassal, which was able to rend its foe of its own volition.

"—Awaken, Acedia!"

"Tch!!"

Clicking her tongue in annoyance, she slammed the mass of cold into the sword.

In terms of simple volume of demonic energy, Giada's cold had an overwhelming advantage. But since The Cleansing had whittled away her Beast Vassal's power, it could not force back the sword Beast Vassal.

The air cracked as the two Beast Vassals collided before they vanished simultaneously, apparently having offset each other. A second later, the crimson bulwark also vanished. Asagi/Mogwai had exceeded their computational power, so they could no longer maintain The Cleansing's activation.

"An ebon-bladed Beast Vassal... Aradahl, is it?"

Giada posed the question as she slowly looked behind her.

Standing in the Saikai Academy courtyard was a tall man with long black hair

wearing an old-fashioned long coat. This was Velesh Aradahl, a chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire—and a close confidant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.

“Pardon my impoliteness for intruding upon the field of battle. I have come to represent my primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.”

Aradahl touched his hand to his chest with reverence, but somehow, he also spoke with the demeanor of a man in despair. Surely, deep in his heart, he had no desire to recklessly make an enemy of the Third Primogenitor. In fact, Aradahl had become the Sakai Academy Domain's ally merely on the whims of the First Primogenitor.

Soldiers dressed in extravagant military uniforms stood in attendance behind him. They comprised the Vampire Corps of the Warlord's Empire.

“How intriguing...”

Giada licked her lips with the tip of her tongue as she slowly glanced around the area. To her front was Asagi; behind her was Aradahl and his vampire subordinates. On top of that, Misaki Sasasaki, a wielder of the Divine Mystic Arts, was also in attendance.

On the other hand, Yuno and Rui had completely overwhelmed the two subordinates Giada had brought along. At the very least, she was at a numerical disadvantage.

Despite these odds, as the Third Primogenitor, she commanded twenty-seven Beast Vassals. Summoning several of them would easily evaporate Asagi and company's advantage.

But there was no guarantee that Aradahl's liege, the First Primogenitor, would simply watch that in silence.

In the worst case, a full-scale conflict could break out between primogenitors right then and there.

Giada looked back at Aradahl's stony expression with a broad, amused smile.

“I would love to hold a decisive battle here, but taking you on with a wielder of The Cleansing just seems like too much trouble. And there are others drawn

to trouble here as well.”

With a strained smile, she shifted her gaze to the roof of the middle of Saikai Academy some two hundred meters away. A small figure stood on the roof—but not one of a Saikai Academy student.

He was a young foreigner with beautiful black hair, olive skin, and eyes of gold. He came off like a temperamental young lion, yet his youth also held an aura of mysterious dignity.

This was Iblisveil Aziz, prince of the Dominion the Fallen Dynasty—

He was observing the battle between Giada and Asagi’s side, looking for an opening in the victor he could exploit.

Giada noticed this, yet remained utterly composed; she really did have nerves of steel befitting the title of Third Primogenitor.

“A fine negotiation it was. We shall someday meet again, Priestess of Cain—farewell.”

Transforming into gleaming viridian mist, Giada vanished from sight, as though she’d melted right into thin air.

At some point, the leopard-headed vampires caught by the glue rounds had also vanished. Giada had probably taken them with her.

“*Hah*...so tired... I mean really, doing that this early in the morning...”

Left behind, Asagi flopped into the closest available chair and stared up at the sky.

That was how the fourth day of the Electoral War started for Saikai Academy Domain.

5

“Grounded Lightning—!”

The blunt attack unleashed from Yukina’s right palm punched through the jaw of the young beast person. From his expression, the beast person seemed not to even comprehend what had happened as he flew hard through the air, eyes

white as he fainted.

Stepping right over their compatriots, fresh enemies assaulted her. This group of violent demons wearing street gang-style attire were *rogue ruler candidates* who had lost their domains and subjects.

“Aww, crap! There’s no end to ’em! What hole did these guys crawl out from?!”

Kojou lamented as he desperately dodged a ball of fire shot at him via magic spell.

At present, Kojou and Yukina were in the northern section of Itogami Island. They were inside a station connecting Island East and North for transferring between monorail lines.

The Electoral War had brought monorail travel to a halt. That meant the terminal should have been sparse on guests. It was with that expectation Kojou and Yukina had opted for the monorail’s elevated bridges as the best way to move around. Encountering rogue ruler candidates in such a place was an unfortunate accident for both parties.

“They seem to be demons that set up camp in Island East. I suppose the rumors that the Second Primogenitor appeared in the east were true.”

Clutching her silver spear, Yukina breathed hard as she spoke. The group of delinquent demons they’d encountered weren’t especially battle hardened, but there were just too many of them. To Kojou and Yukina, worn down from fighting the Order of the End the night before, they were troublesome foes indeed.

“So Fallgazer’s army pushed them out, and they fled here into Island North, huh—”

Kojou twisted his lips in visible annoyance as he spat out the words.

“—Geez, this ain’t no joke. Giada settin’ up in Island South is bad enough as it is! Plus, the First Primogenitor went over to Island West, right?”

“Yes. It seems that he’s been staying in Yume’s domain since before you and I returned to Itogami Island.”

Yukina answered while standing back-to-back with him. Irritated, Kojou grimaced.

“What the hell is that guy thinking?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea, either... However, it appears that Yume and the others get along very well with him...”

“...No choice but to trust him for the time being, huh?”

He sighed deeply, suppressing his inner bewilderment and concern.

They’d only exchanged a brief conversation in an Aldegian airport, but for better or worse, the man going by Ki Juranbarada, who Kojou had encountered, possessed a sunny, jovial disposition.

Kojou didn’t know why the man had come to Itogami Island, but as far as he could tell from what Yukina had told him, he hadn’t approached her out of some weird scheme. For starters, he was so powerful that if he and Kojou happened to confront each other, he wouldn’t even have to take Yume or Nagisa hostage beforehand or anything of the sort.

“What’s with all these people already—?!”

The angry voice of the other girl with them in the station pulled Kojou out of his scattered thoughts and back to reality. Using her undulating long sword, the white-haired girl wearing a long wimple—Shizuri Kasugaya—was engaged in a slashing contest with a lizardman swordsman.

“There she is! It’s the white-haired ogre, Kazugatani!”

“The ruler of the Saikai Academy Domain who sent the Third Primogenitor packing?!”

When they’d noticed her presence, the group of demons had gone after her all at once, completely ignoring the other pair. Their target was Shizuri, not Kojou or Yukina. They’d been driven out of their domains, so if they could defeat Shizuri, a fellow ruler candidate, they would steal the right to rule Saikai Academy Domain from her. That was why they had attacked Kojou and the others at the drop of a hat when they’d bumped into each other at the station.

“Kasutaniiii! Your head is mine!”

A beast person from one of the various strains of werewolves assaulted Shizuri from above with nimble movements.

“K-Kasutani...?!”

Lips twitching, Shizuri blocked her enemies’ blows. Hearing them butcher the pronunciation of her Japanese family name was making her see red.

“You won’t get away, Kasuyaaaaa!”

“Take this, Kasutaaa!”

“I-it is Kasugaya! Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella!”

Shizuri swung her sword in anger, enraged at them changing how she was addressed like some demented game of telephone. Her hair was disheveled, and her breathing was ragged. She seemed even more exhausted than Kojou and Yukina. Maybe that was why she came off as unable to concentrate on the fight in front of her.

“You all right, Cas?!”

“But of course! No matter how many they may be, foes so base are unworthy to face a Paladin of Gisella!”

Shizuri glared back at the concerned Kojou and shouted in anger. It was obvious that she was putting on a strong front. She was near the limits of her endurance.

Tch, went Kojou’s harsh click of his tongue. He did a quick head count of the demons continuing to bear down upon them.

Even just from what he could make out, the delinquent monsters targeting Shizuri were over fifty strong. Their strength would surely have given out if they had taken them on one by one. At this point, all Kojou had left to draw on was the inexhaustible demonic power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Aww, crap— C’mon over, Sadalmelik Albus!”

Kojou summoned his own Beast Vassal in a fit of desperation.

In a burst of pale light, a Beast Vassal with a transparent body that looked like flowing water appeared.

Its upper body was that of a beautiful woman; its lower half, that of an enormous serpent. Its hair was composed of countless flowing snakes.

It was a pale Undine—a water maid.

“Wha...?!”

“The hell is thaaaat?!”

The sudden appearance of the powerful Beast Vassal caused the delinquent demons to fall into panic.

Unlike the other Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, Sadalmelik Albus did not possess explosive attacks that scattered its targets to the winds. Instead, the Fourth Primogenitor’s eleventh Beast Vassal possessed the powers of healing and regeneration. Any matter enveloped in the water maid’s transparent flesh returned to its origins on an atomic level, reverting to its proper state.

Creatures reverted to before they were even born. Resilient castle walls became clumps of soil. High-end cities transformed into barren wastelands. Advanced civilizations morphed back into prehistoric times—hers was a destructive power that returned everything to nothingness.

The water maid aimed her destructive healing beneath the feet of the delinquent creatures surrounding Kojou and company—to the monorail station itself. The building’s walls turned to collapsing sand, as though time itself was being rewound; similarly, the steel girders supporting it were dismantled down to iron atoms.

The collapsing station engulfed the helpless, densely packed group of delinquents, who subsequently plummeted toward the surface of the earth. There, a large hole had opened to reveal the white, frothing surface of the sea. Kojou’s Beast Vassal had already destroyed the artificial soil they would have landed on.

“You overdid it, senpai...damaging Itogami Island so badly again...”

Lowering the spear she wielded, Yukina turned her reproachful gaze toward Kojou.

The greater part of their foes, who'd suddenly plunged into the sea, were in a state of terror. They no longer had the luxury of going after Shizuri.

They'd paid a significant price for that victory, however. The monorail station was now half-wrecked, and part of the rail itself had vanished, as though it had been cleanly cut away. Since the monorail itself was shut down, there was no immediate effect upon traffic, but it'd probably take a considerable expense to fix.

"Not like there was any alternative. If you wanna complain, complain to the shitty brats who caused this stupid mess."

Kojou languidly leaned against a wall as he made that lazy rebuttal.

"In other words...The Blood?"

Yukina sullenly pursed her lips. Kojou nodded with displeasure.

"Guess the point of this Electoral War was to draw the primogenitors to this island and make me fight 'em. There's stupid, and then there's that. Besides that, they sure fell for it awful easy."

"I...suppose they did."

The monsters who'd fallen into the sea were engaging in unsightly competitions to crawl up the coast ahead of the others. Yukina exhaled powerlessly as they did this beneath her gaze.

"However, the current situation on Itogami Island is moving according to The Blood and the Order of the End's plans. So long as the primogenitors are on this island, it will be difficult to bring the Electoral War to a close."

"Difficult? If we captured The Blood and took back Keystone Gate, wouldn't that settle things right there?"

Kojou seemed a little surprised as he prompted back. "No," replied Yukina with a grave shake of her head.

"If it came to that, the three primogenitors would surely move to hinder you, senpai. If the Electoral War ended, they would lose their justification for remaining on Itogami Island."

"So, what, the reason Giada attacked me was to bail The Blood out of a

jam...?”

Kojou ruefully clenched his back teeth as he recalled his encounter with Giada Kukulkin the previous night.

When Kojou had tried to pursue The Blood as he fled, Giada’s Beast Vassal had attacked him by surprise to impede him. That was not a simple declaration of war; she’d done it with the express aim of letting The Blood get away, thereby prolonging the Electoral War.

“Also, now that all the primogenitors have gathered upon the island, The Blood has no reason to show himself in front of you any longer, senpai. After all, his objective is to make you fight the other primogenitors, to prove that the Fourth Primogenitor is the strongest—”

“So he’s decided to watch from up high until the Electoral War ends, has he?”

“Yes. Most likely.”

Yukina lowered her eyes with a stiff look on her face.

Kenon—Number Zero of the Kaleid Bloods—had stated that his objective was for the Fourth Primogenitor to be regarded as a symbol of fear. If that was true, he would not fight with Kojou in the future. After all, his real desire was for Kojou to battle the other primogenitors and emerge victorious. That was his sole motivation behind crafting a “Colosseum” for the vampire primogenitors.

“In either case, it’s difficult for us to conduct a search for The Blood’s whereabouts as we are now.”

“Yeah...”

Kojou grudgingly agreed with Yukina’s analysis.

“Well, fine. I’ll leave all the thinking about annoying stuff for later. For now, let’s get movin’. It’ll be real trouble if other ruler candidates spot us.”

“Move...you say?”

Yukina knit her brows, conflicted. Kojou turned his eyes toward the wreckage of the elevated bridge.

“But it’s impossible to ride the monorail line to cross over into Island South

now. After having used such spectacular demonic energy, the Chaos Zone units have surely detected your presence, senpai.”

“So we can’t return to Saikai Academy, huh?”

Kojou lowered his shoulders with regret as he gazed at the soil of the artificial isle on the other side of the canal.

Saikai Academy Domain was completely isolated, its surroundings under occupation by forces from the Chaos Zone. Kojou and his friends had been in the middle of heading to Island South’s eastern coast. But their unexpected encounter with the stray ruler candidates had completely foiled their plan.

“The Tensou Academy Domain is pretty close by, but I would prefer to avoid encountering the First Primogenitor in such a depleted state. After all, we’re completely in the dark about his objectives...”

“Ki Juranbarada, huh... What do you think, Cas? You’ve met the First Primogenitor, too, right?”

Kojou tossed his voice toward Shizuri’s back. However, Shizuri said nothing in reply. She was still holding her drawn sword, as though she were dazed.

He found this suspicious as he approached her.

“...Cas?”

“Y-yes!”

After he spoke her name in her ear, Shizuri lifted her head in surprise.

A guilty look came over her face as she realized that Kojou and Yukina were staring at her with concern.

“*Scusa*...I’m sorry. I was somewhat lost in thought.”

“About the swordswoman from the Order of the End? She used a blue demonic sword that was quite similar to yours, Miss Kasugaya—”

Yukina asked that out of apparent consideration for Shizuri. Kojou stared at Shizuri, a little surprised. He recalled that Shizuri’s movements had lost some of their luster in the middle of that engagement.

“Was it someone you know?”

“No. It’s not quite like that... It’s just...”

Shizuri tried to gloss things over, but she trailed off when she glanced at Kojou’s and Yukina’s worried faces. With a single brief sigh, she rephrased things in a quiet tone of voice.

“She, too...is an ogre.”

“Ogre? You mean you’re of the same people? But that doesn’t mean you’re family or anything, right?”

“I do not know. However, that woman clearly knows me... She spoke as if she despises me. And then there’s that demonic sword she possesses...Hauras. It should have been passed down through Gisella since it’s so valuable, but...”

“I see... That would weigh on your mind.”

Kojou made a low noise as he grasped why Shizuri was bewildered.

During the collapse of the Demon Sanctuary of Iroise some six years prior, Shizuri had lost all her companions in Gisella, whom she’d thought of as her own family. To her, the last Paladin of Gisella, Hauras symbolized her bonds with her companions.

It was little wonder, then, that Shizuri had been shaken upon learning that the Order of the End possessed something very much like her precious demonic blade.

“Let’s think of a way to look into that ogre and her demonic sword. Perhaps it might help us determine the Order of the End’s whereabouts.”

Yukina proposed this in a very serious tone of voice.

“Y-yes... *Grazie*...thank you.”

For once, Shizuri politely nodded, smiling as she regained her poise.

“Now, then,” said Kojou with a drop of his shoulders, trying to restart their conversation about where to go from there.

But in that instant, Kojou’s heart pounded with a heavy *thump*.

He felt like a bolt of lightning had slammed down right beside him. A numbing, electric pain made his skin tremble.

That blow was unlike anything Kojou had felt up to that point—somewhere on Itogami Island, a powerful demonic energy on par with his own had been unleashed. No, it wasn't in a single place but multiple places at once.

“The hell...?! What's this feeling...?!”

Clutching his chest, Kojou fell to his knees.

His field of vision constricted and reddened. Like a fish flopping around on land, his throat tightened up, leaving him unable to breathe. He seethed with irritation and anger that had no outlet. And then, he felt overwhelming terror.

“Could those be...Beast Vassals of the Second Primogenitor...?”

Yukina exclaimed in surprise as she glared above the sea to the east.

Countless black shadows hovered in the sky above Island East, a horde of flying dinosaurs so enormous that she could make them out even from a great distance away. It was vast enough to fill the sky.

“It's not just in the east...!”

Shizuri looked behind her and shouted. As if it had conspired behind the scenes to adopt the exact same timing, a fresh source of demonic energy appeared from Itogami Island's south side, the direction of Saikai Academy.

“Gu...ooooooooooooo!!”

As the twin demonic energies manifested simultaneously, Kojou felt as though his entire body were being ripped apart.

Just then, the intense pain activated a bizarre sensation that overtook him. A ferocious sense of hunger, a desire to consume everything to the last... A deep desire blazing within him surged up from the innermost depths of his flesh.

“Senpai?! ”

“Kojou?! What are you doing?! ”

Yukina and Shizuri gazed dumbfounded at him, both of his eyes dyed red and fangs bared.

A crimson mist enveloped his entire body. The miasma gushed forth like flames, tracing a strange pattern in midair.

“This is...bad... Get back, Himeragi...! You too, Cas...!”

Kojou warned them in a nearly incoherent voice.

Even he didn't know what was happening to his body. But he knew what it was trying to make him do. What this incredible sense of hunger craved was power—the force that was the source of a vampire's demonic energy.

“Is it...the same...as back then...?”

Amid his thinning consciousness, Kojou remembered. This was a memory of fear, a memory of the day the natural disaster known as the Fourth Primogenitor assaulted that very Itogami Island.

As he lost his sense of reason, nothing entered his vision save the sight of the girls in front of him. He wanted to greedily devour every aspect of them—he could not defy that sweet temptation.

The tiny remaining portion of Kojou's true personality shouted at the corner of his mind, *Kill me!*

Kill me, before I do something that can't be taken back.

Surely, the silver spear Yukina possessed could do it. Surely, Shizuri's sword could do it.

But before he could voice the plea, Kojou leaped toward them.

A shocked expression came over Yukina as she poised her spear, a mostly subconscious movement. Reacting to Kojou's bloodlust, her body had subconsciously adopted a stance to intercept him.

But he never entered her range. A shock wave slammed into him from the side and sent him flying before he got in close.

“Gaah...!”

The rippling strike was unavoidable; it was as if space itself had transformed into a giant maul.

Buffeted by the swaying of space itself, Kojou couldn't even yelp as he vomited blood all over the place. The attack had done enough damage that any normal person would have died on the spot.

The bloody miasma enveloping Kojou's whole body vanished, and the pattern behind his back dissolved.

Freed from his demonic energy's rampage, he fell like a puppet with its strings cut, rolling onto the floor.

"Senpai!"

Gasping as she came back to her senses, Yukina raced over to the fallen Kojou's side.

He couldn't even lift his head as he responded to her with a shaky, groaning voice.

Wounds lined his body and he was thoroughly beaten up, but the violent sense of hunger he'd experienced just moments before had vanished entirely. Apparently, bathing him in even greater demonic energy from up close had decreased the influence of the other primogenitors' demonic energy.

"Have you awoken yet, Kojou Akatsuki?"

With a gentle, ripple-like sway in midair, a witch resembling a little girl appeared.

This was Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void—preeminent wielder of spatial-control magic.

However, her current form differed somewhat from the form Kojou and the others were used to.

Her long black hair and extravagant dress were the same as usual, but there were now thorny vines stretching forth from her shadow that were wrapped all over her.

It looked dangerous, as though some terrible beast lurking in her silhouette was attached to her own body.

Just what had happened to her during the time the Order of the End held her captive?

"Natsuki...Minamiya... What...is that form?"

"A few things happened on my end as well."

When Shizuri posed that question with visible concern, Natsuki glanced at her and lobbed an indifferent reply.

“Sorry, but I can’t tone down my power for the moment. It’s healthier for you if you don’t rampage any further.”

“...Ain’t like I...wanted to rampage in the first...place.”

Wheezing with every breath as he replied, Kojou fainted again, depleted of strength. The wounds Natsuki’s attacks had inflicted ran deeper than they looked.

“K-Kojou?!”

“Senpai, please hang in there! Senpai!”



Shizuri and Yukina sat up his motionless body and shook him violently.

On top of an unknown influence driving him berserk, he'd sustained a blow from the warping of space itself. Even an immortal vampire primogenitor wouldn't escape that unscathed. No wonder his friends were flustered.

For her part, Natsuki looked down at Kojou with a neutral expression and murmured to herself.

"I see. So this is your final desire, 'The Blood'..."

As Kojou had rampaged, a strange pattern had floated up behind his back just before he lost consciousness.

This was the same pattern that the vampire known as Root had once created—eleven pitch-black wings.

CHAPTER TWO
OMENS FORETELLING
A FEAST

CHAPTER TWO

OMENS FORETELLING A FEAST

1

Against a pure blue ocean and sky in the tropics spread forth a steel city resembling a ruin.

It was an inorganic cityscape, like a sooty metropolis from just after the Industrial Revolution or perhaps a factory that was quiet in the dead of night. This was the horde of gigafloats surrounding Itogami Island—the ruin nicknamed New Itogami Island.

Originally constructed in the land of Nod by Cain the Sinful God, these fragments of a fortress city had come from another world.

Transported here thanks to the sealing dragon “Glenda,” research on the island had continued apace as part of the Demon Sanctuary.

Since the ruin was so vast, however, not even 5 percent of the total structure had been surveyed yet.

Apparently, most of the island was still abandoned and out of reach.

Despite that, temporary housing had been placed on part of the island, and corporate labs and factory sites had sprung up there as well. Unsurprisingly, developers placed an especially high priority on completing harbor facilities, roads, and other infrastructure.

Standing in a corner of one of these incomplete harbors was a slender figure.

A youthful Japanese girl clad in the uniform of a well-known girls’ school in the Kansai region.

Her figure was long and graceful. She exuded a flowery elegance and had a beautiful face. Across her back, she carried a large instrument case. Her name

was Sayaka Kirasaka, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

“—Figures that there’s water and electricity to be found even this far out.”

Wind toying with her long, ponytailed hair, she exhaled, her expression somehow bright.

Behind her was a brand-new harbor administration facility building.

“Civilization is wonderful,” Sayaka murmured, deeply moved as she cleaned off her hands with a handkerchief. Though incomplete, the new harbor facility had a women’s washroom furnished with hot water, lavatories, and toilet seats.

A few hours ago, she’d been practically hurled out of a kingdom of Aldegia airplane before parachuting down and wandering around the island. Finally locating a lavatory and toilet made the place seem like an oasis in the desert.

“Just hope I can find a way to cross over to Itogami Island proper from here on out...”

Sayaka let out another sigh as she looked around the deserted harbor once more.

Since her smartphone was out of cell tower range, she didn’t know her exact coordinates. But she’d heard that New Itogami Island and Itogami Island were separated by seven kilometers at the narrowest. Naturally, it would be hard to swim over. She’d need some other form of transportation like a boat as an alternative.

Currently, however, she couldn’t see a single soul, let alone a ferry. The Electoral War had completely severed all freight and passenger traffic between the islands; Sayaka was stranded all alone on a desolate gigafloat.

“Uu...that black-hearted scheming princess... Why do I have to go through this...?”

Face turned toward the heavens, she stood there dumbfounded.

Of course, Sayaka hadn’t dropped onto New Itogami Island because she’d wanted to. The original drop point had been the northern environs of Itogami Island proper, the place where Kojou Akatsuki was likeliest to be.

When she’d arrived, however, the airspace above Itogami Island proper was

chock-full of magic users' familiars. While trying to shake off their pursuit, she'd been thrown off course toward New Itogami Island. That was better than plummeting into the ocean, so she couldn't call reaching land alive and well anything but good fortune. Nevertheless...

"A helicopter...?"

Noticing the boisterous sound of an engine audible overhead, Sayaka looked behind her on reflex.

A tail rotor—model vertical-takeoff-and-landing plane was hovering in the blue afternoon sky. You wouldn't catch any airlines in mainland Japan using this model. The tail of the vehicle bore the MAR logo.

"...I see, MAR is securing people wounded in the Electoral War...so they should be able to carry things from New Itogami Island to the main island, too!"

Sayaka's eyes glimmered as she remembered information she'd heard beforehand.

MAR had signed a contract with the Order of the End to participate in the administration of the Electoral War as a neutral party. Its chief roles were compensating for combat damages, provisioning food and other supplies, and rescuing and treating the injured.

"Securing the wounded" meant transporting them by hospital ship to an anchorage somewhere on New Itogami Island. She had no doubt that the MAR transport plane was heading toward that barge.

Fortunately for her, the transport helicopter was landing in a place not so far removed from the harbor where Sayaka was.

Sayaka "borrowed" a scooter left for getting around the harbor site and rode it toward the transport plane's approximate landing point.

"Found you...!"

On an open piece of land about five kilometers away from the harbor, she caught sight of a tilt rotor aircraft in the immediate aftermath of landing.

Apparently, the place was some kind of MAR Inc. supply base. Three other aircrafts of the same model were parked there.

Upon seeing this with her own eyes, she immediately got off the scooter on impulse rather than logic.

As a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency and an expert in curses and assassinations, she sensed an ominous aura from the base.

Hiding her ride in a gap between some rubble, Sayaka approached the base on foot. The base was positioned between various decaying ruins, so she had no lack of hiding places. She didn't even need to resort to ritual spell camouflage.

"What is this...?"

Sayaka drew in her breath a little as she peeked at the base's layout from the window of a ruin.

It was a makeshift facility pretty much as she expected, but the atmosphere was far more sinister than she'd imagined.

Countless military field tents and armored vehicles were stationed at regular intervals throughout the premises. Barbed wire lined the exterior, while guards armed with firearms patrolled the interior. The transport planes had been loaded up with anti-demon robot tanks. It was like a military encampment.

"They have MAR markings...but this isn't a medical facility by any stretch of the imagination, huh," Sayaka muttered to herself, confused.

The soldiers assigned to that base were clearly equipped to a level that went far beyond simple self-defense. There was no reason to pour this kind of gear and personnel into a game to select the next ruler where people competed for the greatest number of subjects.

In other words, it meant that MAR had assembled these troops for a purpose other than the Electoral War.

Maybe I should dig into their objectives, thought Sayaka, but when she began to dither, a voice suddenly echoed right beside her.

"Well, look at that... Got some wild stuff packed down there."

"...?!!"

Sayaka turned around and tensed up as if she'd been slapped.

A tall, middle-aged man was looking outside the window above Sayaka's shoulder as she squatted.

His loose, unkempt shirt and the stubble on his face gave the man a slovenly quality. Although he was in decent shape for his age, Sayaka found him none too intimidating.

Despite this, she was utterly aghast; she'd been trained as an assassin but hadn't even noticed his approach.

"Troop transport helicopters and robot tanks—and the soldiers are decked out with powered suits with ritual spell camouflage and anti-demon large caliber carbines, huh? Typical special forces stuff. All geared up for land ops on Itogami Island by the looks of it."

Tossing his voice her way, he spoke in an oddly amicable tone.

Sayaka inched back, gasping as she suddenly remembered to draw her sword. Pointing its tip toward the man's chest, she glared with all the hostility she could muster.

"...Who...are you?!"

"Calm down, sweetie. Stay. Stay. I'm not anyone suspicious."

"Not suspicious? What about you *isn't* suspicious...?!"

Sayaka's voice went ragged from being addressed like a domesticated dog.

"Getting this close without me noticing...! Who are you?! Depending on your answer—"

"Get down!"

Before Sayaka could finish her statement, he tackled her to the ground. Her back slammed against the ruin's floor, knocking out her breath. The scraggly man covered her mouth with his hand as Sayaka squirmed in anguish. Her eyes were moist from humiliation and fear.

"Mghh...gggghh...!"

"Quiet. They'll notice us if you keep...ow?!"

He yelped slightly as Sayaka bit his hand as hard as she could. She tried to use

the time the man spent reeling to launch a counterattack before her eyes widened, as the man suddenly produced a rifle without the slightest warning.

“!!”

Seeing the fiendish firearm up so close made a tripwire go off inside of Sayaka’s head.

All emotion vanished. Sayaka activated a physical-enhancement ritual spell exactly as had been drilled into her latent consciousness. Like a programmed machine, her body moved on its own against the man she needed to kill standing before her. Slam a blow into his vitals, put pressure on his carotid artery, and break his cervical vertebrae while both strikes whittled away at his awareness—she’d repeated that sequence against training dummies innumerable times.

It was only thanks to the man’s total lack of hostility that Sayaka managed to avoid launching into her assassination protocol. His back was against a wall while he trained his gaze beyond the window.

In the direction he was looking hovered a small, spherical machine—a drone that survived the encampment’s vicinity.

It momentarily revolved in the sky above the ruin Sayaka and the man were in before flying off in the direction of the encampment. Seeing this, he lowered his firearm and released her.

“So it left. That’s Aldegian-made jammers for you. Damn effective stuff.”

He smiled proudly as he touched a device hanging from his neck resembling a security buzzer.

“Sorry I surprised you. That was ’cause I saw the recon drone puttering around.”

“You saved...me? I...um...”

Finally grasping the situation, Sayaka looked up at him awkwardly.

The man gazed in apparent delight at the clear bite marks she’d left in his hand.

“Ahhh, don’t worry about this. Getting bit by a cute sweetheart like you is a

prize in itself.”

“R-reward...”

Goose bumps spread across her entire body. Maybe this guy really was dangerous after all, she decided. A man his age couldn’t act any creepier if he tried.

“Hold on. If I lick this wound, does that make it an indirect kiss with a babe?”

“?!”

“Heh, I’m kidding, I’m kidding. It’s a joke—so, uh, could you lower Rosen Chevalier Plus now? Er...no, that’s the original Type Six, isn’t it?”

“...Who are you?! What’s your objective?”

Sayaka’s Der Freischütz was a Lion King Agency prototype area-suppression weapon. In her mind, anyone who knew about it couldn’t possibly be an innocent civilian.

The man, however, just gave a laid-back chuckle as he put up both of his hands.

“Me? I’m exactly what I look like, a passing archaeologist—”

“In what world are there archaeologists as shady as you running around?!”

“Um, well, I grant you that it’s only half of me in the world on this side, though.”

“Huh?”

Sayaka’s gaze grew serious at the lack of clear meaning in the man’s testimony. Despite that, he kept his expression of feigned innocence on as his gaze shifted outside.

“Let’s set stuff about me aside for the moment. The issue is the army over there, right? There’s an underside to this Electoral War thing.”

“That might very well be the case but...”

“—Dammit, that Fourth Primogenitor is so pathetic. What kind of World’s Mightiest Vampire lets uninvited guests come onto his island and trample it any way they please? Maybe I saw too much in him or maybe he was just overrated,

but it seems like it's too much for him, don't it? He's one puny bastard—not a lick of talent whatsoever.”

The man spat as he pushed her long sword away.

That instant, something seemed to *snap* inside of Sayaka as her expression tensed. For some reason, his arbitrary way of speaking really grated on her nerves.

“J...just to make this clear, the Fourth Primogenitor was not on Itogami Island when the Electoral War began, you see. So this situation isn't his responsibility whatsoever, I'll have you know!”

“Oh reaaally...”

The man turned back at Sayaka's annoyed retort with deep interest.

“But it's undeniable that he didn't raise hand nor foot and left the chaos as is when he got back on the island, right?”

“Who decided that?! He's gotten dragged into so much shit he didn't ask for up until now, but he still put his body on the line to protect this place anyway. And he'll absolutely take care of this mess, too! I mean he has Yukina at his side...and m-me, too...!”

“Hmm... I see. You're very dependable.”

Unexpectedly, the man readily accepted Sayaka's assertions. Feeling a little disappointment over that somehow, she thrust her chest out in satisfaction.

“W-well, of course I am.”

“He's lucky to have a sweetheart like you caring this much about him.”

“Um, er? C-caring about... I...didn't mean to make it sound like I...”

The man's unforeseen assumptions made her shrill voice go soft.

“Sweetie, could it be...? Have you and that Kojou bastard done it already?”

“Done...?! Wha...? O-of course n...”

“Hey, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's only natural for two people who love each other to do that, right?”

“I have no reason to be taking lectures on that from the likes of... Wait, how did you know Kojou’s name...?!”

“Hold on. That has to wait.”

Forcing a change of subject, he glared in the direction of the base. A new tilt rotor plane had landed, and the passengers it had ferried were disembarking.

“That’s...?”

Sayaka muttered that question to herself as she watched the men coming out of the tilt rotor.

The men were dressed in white, but they gave off a shady vibe for some reason. The group seemed way too brutal for mere doctors and researchers. Perhaps she felt as much because of the armed soldiers that had come along with them.

“MAR Lab Number Nine—MAR’s infamous black ops section dealing with inhuman experiments on live demonic subjects.”

“MAR...black ops? Ah...!”

Upon hearing his observation, Sayaka suddenly blurted out in surprise. That was because the soldiers were dragging along someone she hadn’t expected to see as they disembarked from the transport plane.

“That’s Kojou Akatsuki’s mother...?! Why are they treating her like...?!”

Bewildered, she pressed the man for answers.

Mimori Akatsuki, chief researcher of MAR’s medical branch, was being led along in handcuffs. She wasn’t only Kojou’s mother but also an acquaintance of sorts to Sayaka herself.

Even though she was a fellow MAR employee, they were treating her like a prisoner.

“They’re handling her as a wee bit of a traitor. Can’t really be helped, given how she let Aurora Florestina, the twelfth Kaleid Blood, escape from MAR custody.”

“She... She helped Twelfth Kaleid Blood Aurora escape?”

His causal treatment of such a crucial piece of information left Sayaka totally shocked.

During that time, the man pulled an anti-tank rocket launcher and an RPG ammunition bag almost out of nowhere. She didn't feel the aura of a spatial-control spell being used. He didn't even look like a magic user to begin with. Nevertheless, he picked them up casually, as though he'd placed them right there beforehand.

“—So I'm gonna go give her a wee bit of a rescue. I'd be pretty grateful if you helped out, but what are you gonna do? This might be your future mother-in-law, you know?”

Sayaka wasn't able to interpret his weird sleight of hand as the man asked her that question. In fact, she was so confused that she forgot all about making a comeback to his assertion that this might be her future mother-in-law.

“Saving her—that's your objective? Why?”

“Well, I mean, she's my wife and all.

“We're separated, though,” the man amended before breaking into a “Wa-ha-ha” laugh.

Sayaka stiffened up as if she were frozen and fixed her stare upon the man's face.

“W...wife? You are the spouse of Kojou Akatsuki's mother...?!”

“Indeed I am. Gajou Akatsuki. Pleased to meet ya.”

Gazing at Sayaka's surprise with obvious delight, the man gave her a playful wink.

“Wh-whaaaaaat—?!”

Shaken, her shriek echoed throughout the ruin on New Itogami Island.

Apparently taking this as his cue, Gajou fired the rocket launcher toward the MAR encampment.

What returned Kojou to consciousness were the sweet aromas of simmering soy sauce, mirin, sugar, beef grease, and long green onions fried into a single harmonious form. The scent of Kansai-style sukiyaki.

He was in a broad underground chamber with numerous sorcerous devices along the edges. A number of people had gathered in a section of the room. They were surrounding a frying pan placed upon a workbench.

“Akatsuki, are you awake?”

Adjusting the output of the gas-controlled flame, Kanon Kanase called over upon realizing Kojou had roused.

Kojou looked back absentmindedly at the sight of Kanon wearing an apron over her school uniform. It was so surreal that it felt like a very convenient dream.

“...Kana...se?”

“The meal will be ready very soon.”

“Eh?”

Not realizing he was still befuddled, she excitedly went off to fetch fresh utensils.

Approaching in her stead were Shizuri and Yukina. They bore chopsticks and bowls, so they were probably in the middle of a meal of their own.

“Kojou, you’re awake!”

“Where are...?”

He gazed up at Shizuri as he asked. The instant he saw the two girls’ faces, Kojou remembered what had happened prior to him passing out. Just before the power of the Fourth Primogenitor made him go berserk, Natsuki had teleported in out of nowhere and blown him away nice and good.

“This is Kano’s father’s lab. We couldn’t think of another place where you could be treated and examined, senpai.”

This time, Yukina replied to Kojou’s question.

Heaving a sigh, he glanced around the subterranean chamber.

Itogami Island Sorcery Lab Number Six, located in the lowest strata of Island North. Since it was completely isolated from the outside world, the place was closer to a prison than anything else. It was one of the few Gigafloat Management Corporation facilities spared from the effects of the Electoral War.

“So in the end we wound up back here...”

Kojou sat up sluggishly and examined a clock on the wall.

It was past six PM. Based on that, he’d continued sleeping for nearly half a day, probably because of how his rampage had affected him more than the damage from Natsuki’s attack.

“How do you feel, Fourth Primogenitor?”

The man in charge of the lab, Kensei Kanase, posed that question in his usual gloomy voice.

“So far as I can tell from this data, there is nothing wrong with your body. That being said, a primogenitor’s body cannot accept magic spells, so I can only rely on standard medical practices, which may be small comfort.”

“Nah, I’m grateful. Guess that’s another one I owe you.”

Rotating his limbs, Kojou checked his physical condition. Thanks to the particular healing abilities vampires possessed, his external wounds were all healing. There was a strange emptiness in his stomach and a dryness in his throat, but considering that he hadn’t had anything to eat since the night before, it was a normal response if anything.

“Come to think of it, how are we able to cook sukiyaki in a place like this?”

“That’s, erm... These are meat and vegetables the subjects provided to us, you see.”

Yukina shifted her eyes to the food on the table as she spoke.

“...Subjects?”

Whose? went Kojou with a tilt of his head. Presently, the only ruler candidate there was Shizuri, but her domain was the Saikai Academy area over in Island South. That was a bit of a hike to bring over beef and veggies.

“Actually, senpai, ah...while you were sleeping, Ms. Minamiya subjugated approximately seventy percent of the domains in Island North.”

Yukina continued her explanation like that, perhaps finding it a little hard to spit it out because she thought it wouldn't seem true.

His eyes bulged as he looked back at her.

“Natsuki did that all by herself...? I wasn't even sleeping half a day, right?”

“Many of the ruler candidates in Island North were from the Island Guard, so they were submissive to... Er, rather, they favored Ms. Minamiya to begin with. Even if that hadn't been the case, the influx of stray ruler candidates had overwhelmed the domains in Island North, you see.”

“So I guess I should be real grateful Natsuki became a ruler candidate, then?”

“I see,” mused Kojou, folding his arms in comprehension.

With vampire primogenitors descending upon the three regions of Islands East, West, and South, the only region they weren't occupying, Island North, had turned into a dangerous battlefield as small, weak ruler candidates clashed among themselves. Many of the subjects must have yearned for the appearance of a powerful ruler before the petty warlords succumbed to mutual collapse. It was then that the Witch of the Void, the most qualified person available to put Island North in order, came onto the scene.

“So where did Natsuki go off to?”

A questioning look came over Kojou as he looked around the lab. Natsuki was nowhere to be found, something that had bugged him since earlier.

“Ms. Minamiya returned to the Prison Barrier, apparently to repair the seal on her Guardian. Because of that, she said she wouldn't be returning to this world for the time being.”

There was a bit of gloom mixed into Yukina's voice. Bewildered, Kojou knit his brows.

“Natsuki's Guardian? You mean that stupid-huge thing that's like a suit of armor...and hold on, seal?”

“Apparently, Ms. Minamiya's Guardian's mere existence warps space in our

realm, so she normally keeps it restrained using a sorcerous device. However, during combat with the Order of the End, it unshackled itself from the restraining device...”

“...You mean its power has been held back all this time...?” Kojou murmured in astonishment.

The Guardian that Natsuki called Rheingold had once suppressed a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor through raw force. But apparently the golden knight statue hadn’t even been serious back then.

“Thanks to her Guardian appearing, no one can deploy spatial control–type magic spells in the general vicinity. I don’t think the effects will subside soon, either.”

Kensei Kanase stated this, as though to drive Kojou’s surprise even deeper.

“It’s all crazy stuff with her as per usual.”

Kojou acted half-exasperated as he shook his head. That monster warped space just through manifesting in their world. It was on par with a natural disaster. Little wonder, then, that sealing its power was a chore even for Natsuki.

In reporting that spatial control–type incantations were now unusable, she’d also inadvertently hit upon an inconvenient truth. Namely, that they couldn’t rely on Kensei Kanase’s teleportation spells as a means of getting around.

“Even if it was a surprise attack, the power was sufficient to put the Fourth Primogenitor out of commission for nearly half a day as a result. If anything, perhaps you should be glad there weren’t any other effects.”

Kensei nodded gravely as he spoke.

“Well, not that the causes of your stupor were limited to her attack alone.”

“...I suppose you’re right.”

Kojou lowered his shoulders dejectedly. Certainly, he’d taken a lot of damage from Natsuki, but she hadn’t been the only reason he’d recovered so slowly.

Back at the monorail station, a bizarre sense of hunger and thirst had overtaken him. The byproducts of the sensation remained deep in Kojou’s body,

a weariness that made him feel like molten lava that had cooled and hardened in place.

“Famished, perhaps?”

Reading his emotions, Kanase asked that as if making idle conversation. Perhaps unconsciously reacting to her words, Kojou’s stomach grumbled loudly.

“Shall I serve you some sukiyaki as well, senpai?”

Yukina giggled and smiled as she picked up an empty bowl.

As if trying to compete with her, Shizuri posed with chopsticks and a ladle.

“Looks like I’ve got no choice but to step up. Just wait a few moments.”

“Ah, er, I...”

Which one should I stop? thought Kojou, dithering as he watched the pair snatch ingredients from each other. Of course, figuring out who got to serve sukiyaki shouldn’t have been a competition. Up until that moment, it probably hadn’t been.

“Please wait, Miss Kasugaya. *Perhaps you are not aware of this*, but since Akatsuki-senpai has difficulty with green onions, I believe it would be best to reduce them slightly—”

Yukina asserted this with a reserved tone of voice as she watched the other girl pile up food in her bowl.

That one casual statement caused Shizuri to sullenly knit her brows.

“I have spent *a very long time* with Kojou, so I’m obviously aware of that. Himeragi, do you not think there’s a nutritional balance issue with how you are preparing to serve nothing but meat?”

“Ah, I am deliberately using a fair bit of meat since Akatsuki-senpai has lost a great deal of blood. Proteins are vital nutrients for the production of red blood cells and hemoglobin.”

Even as her expression stiffened under Shizuri’s unexpected rebuttal, Yukina calmly issued her retort.

This served only to irk the other girl further.

“If you’re going to talk about the components of blood, then the types of vitamins contained in green onions are also very important. Indulging Kojou in his likes and dislikes will do him no good.”

“The allicin contained in green onions has the same composition of that in garlic, does it not?”

“Mere garlic is nothing to the World’s Mightiest Vampire. For that matter, Kojou had no problem eating gyoza or peperoncino!”

“Are you really bringing up something that happened in the virtual space of Onrai Island?!”

“Even if it occurred virtually, it’s undeniable that Kojou and I were together, nonetheless!”

“Ahhh...er, none of that stuff really matters, so you don’t need to argue about it...”

Kojou was a bit at a loss as he watched Yukina and Shizuri engage in a fruitless war of words. Both were possessed by such an ultra-serious sense of responsibility that neither felt prepared to yield. The way he saw it, they were actually pretty similar, so maybe that was why they didn’t see eye to eye on a fundamental level. Plus, there was the fact they’d thrown genuine punches at each other the first time they’d met.

“Akatsuki, here you go.”

Serene as always, Kanon didn’t notice the dispute between Yukina and Shizuri and tendered a bowl of sukiyaki in front of Kojou. His lips stiffened as he accepted the bowl from the smiling girl.

“Ahhh...thanks, Kanase.”

“You are welcome.”

Desperate, he dug into the sukiyaki. Kanon watched with a grin on her face.

Somehow, the stares Yukina and Shizuri gave Kojou as he ate seemed rather resentful.

Their meals finished, Kojou and the others ended up staying at Sorcery Lab Number Six for the night.

They still hadn't pinpointed The Blood and the Order of the End's whereabouts as of the night before, and with the primogenitors' armed forces occupying the other regions, they couldn't do anything that would draw attention to them. Since Kojou carelessly moving about would only spell more trouble, they'd concluded there was no good option save watching how the situation developed.

There was one more reason they'd stayed put—the fact that Kojou wasn't altogether physically fit yet.

Since the lab had been designed to serve as a prison for sorcerous criminals, they couldn't hope for the comforts of a five-star hotel. Their bedrooms were like cells, furnished only with a bed, and luxuriant theater rooms and gym rooms were nowhere to be found. The only noteworthy thing it did have was an excessively spacious shower room.

“Shit...it's no good...!”

It was the dead of night. As cold water sprinkled over Kojou, he kept bumping his head against the wall of the shower.

The sense of racking hunger he'd felt upon awakening had only grown fiercer with time.

It wasn't an issue of insufficient food. He'd been offered so much sukiyaki that he hadn't been able to eat it all, and he'd drank enough of the black tea Shizuri had insisted on pouring him to get sick of it.

Despite that, Kojou's hunger and thirst hadn't been sated in the slightest.

He continued pouring water onto his head in an effort to soothe his nerves even a little when...

“Akatsuki, are you there?”

From outside the shower room, he heard a girl's gentle voice.

Kojou turned off the shower and wrapped a bath towel around his hips.

Standing outside the frosted glass door was Kanon, dressed in a T-shirt and

shorts. Kojou tensed up for no particular reason; he wasn't used to seeing her in such a plain outfit.

"Er...Kanase? Why are you here at a time like this?"

"I brought you a change of clothes, Akatsuki."

As he opened the door halfway and poked out his head, Kanon grinned and told him that. She was holding a fresh bundle of menswear against her chest.

"A new outfit?"

"Yes. Abbess provided them to me."

"Alchemy, huh...? What were the original materials?"

Kojou raised an eyebrow as he posed the question. Kanon was referring to Nina Adelard, the self-proclaimed Great Alchemist of Yore. After a series of twists and turns, Nina had become the size of a doll not even thirty centimeters tall, but her prowess as an alchemist remained intact, so she could make something as simple as clothes with ease even while tiny. She did, however, require ingredients to use as "fuel."

"She used Chinese cabbage and fried tofu for the western-style clothes."

Kanon replied in a tone of voice lacking the slightest hesitation. Kojou's eyes popped wide open.

"Those are sukiyaki ingredients, aren't they?! Wow, alchemy's amazin'!"

"I am kidding. She actually used spare white sheets and prison uniforms."

"You were kidding?! Er...prison clothes...prison clothes, huh... Well, that's fine..."

Kojou made a weak, pained smile at the surprise twist. Either way, a new outfit was something he was grateful for. *Now that she's done, Kanon'll probably head off*, thought Kojou, as he thanked her and tried to return to the shower room.

Kanon, however, set the clothes down on the changing room bench and slipped past the half-open glass door.

"Do you mind if I come in?"

“Eh? Come in... You do know this is a shower room, right?”

He replied to her sudden request obtusely.

The silver-haired girl seemed to accept something or other as she blinked heavily.

“Would it be better if I took off my clothes as well?”

“W-wait a sec! How did it turn into that?!”

As she put her hands to the hem of her T-shirt out of the blue, he hastily tried to stop her. However, he hesitated to approach her when he recalled that he was only wearing a towel himself.

Kanon, on the other hand, glanced back at Kojou with a thoroughly serious look.

“My clothes will get soaked if I don’t take them off.”

“Never mind that—why did this turn into us getting into the shower together?!”

Thrown for a loop, he tried to shoo her away. But Kanon just stripped without hesitation and moved closer to him.

“Kanase...why...?!”

Kojou murmured this in a daze, captivated at the sight of her so exposed.

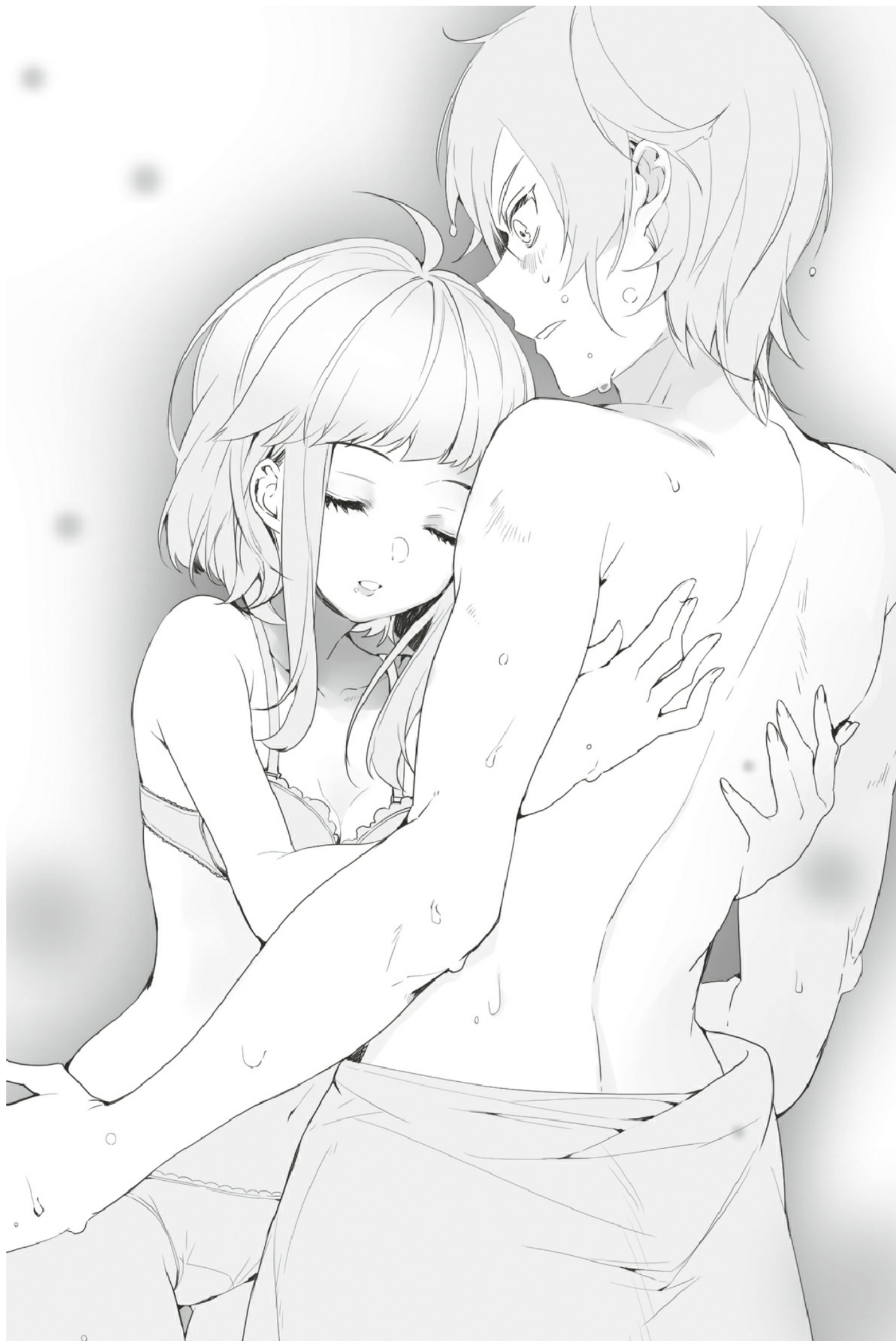
Obviously, Kanon must have had some scruples about being fully nude, because she still had on her underwear. But the pale flesh she’d bared was plenty to tempt him.

Her lips were delicate, fairylike. She had slender shoulders and a slight swell to her chest. The pure-looking underwear she wore only made the effect more sensuous still.

“I hear voices.”

Kojou went rigid, and Kanon quietly walked close to him, speaking with an earnest expression.

“...Voices?” he asked, his own raspy. Kanon’s blue eyes beheld Kojou within them.



“The voices of the beasts. The beasts inside you.”

She gently touched her ear to his damp chest. He could feel her warmth through the skin she pressed to his own. The sweet scent of her silver hair pricked at his nostrils.

Suddenly, a ferocious sensation raced up Kojou’s spine. Pleasure accompanied by powerful destructive impulses dyed his consciousness white.

“Don’t! Kanase, get back!”

Grabbing hold of her shoulders, he tried to force her off him.

But Kanon moved her hands around Kojou’s back, firmly embracing him with a strength and power he never saw coming.

“It’s all right... It’s all right; you don’t need to be afraid.”

“K-Kanase...?”

“I want to assist you, Akatsuki. I can’t fight by your side like Yukina and Shizuri, so if I can do at least this much...”

She bared her slender neck right before his eyes, like a holy maiden offering her own body up as a sacrifice. He was keenly aware of the blue blood vessels visible through her delicate skin.

“Kanase...!”

A ferocious hunger and thirst wrecked Kojou’s sense of reason as he moved his hands around Kanon’s back.

The instant that his lips touched against her nape—

Click, went the changing room door as it opened. He sensed someone coming in.

“?!”

Kanon froze as if she’d been struck by electricity. Kojou, on the other hand, numbed as he stopped moving.

Cold sweat gushed from his back, leaving him thoroughly drenched.

After all, the only men in the facility they were spending the night with were

him and Kensei Kanase. And given that Kojou was in the shower room, it was unthinkable anyone other than Kensei would enter the changing room.

Just how would the former Court Sorcerous Engineer react when he saw Kojou and his daughter disrobed and embracing each other? Kojou went pale with fear just picturing it in his mind.

But what he heard from the changing room was the voice of an individual he'd expected even less.

"Ehi... Kojou? Are you there?"

"C-Cas?"

Though liberated from his initial fears, Kojou was struck by fresh confusion.

Shizuri Kasugaya, self-proclaimed Paladin of Gisella, was louder about infringements of moral standards than most. To Kojou, a girl like her entering a men's shower room in the dead of night was no small matter. He would've liked to keep their breath down so that she might move on, but given the tension of the situation, that possibility was distinctly unrealistic.

"Sorry, but could you hide in here for a little while?"

Kojou requested with a hushed voice. Yes, said Kanon's nod. She was cooperative by default.

Pushing her to the least conspicuous corner of the shower, he turned toward the changing room.

Then he opened the glass entrance before Shizuri could come in.

She was glancing over her shoulder when she noticed him.

"Kojou. If you are there, I would appreciate a prompt repl— Why are you undressed?!"

Her eyes bulged wide as she instantly placed her hand on the hilt of her long sword.

Kojou stroked his drenched forelocks up with an air of annoyance.

"You're the one who decided to come in here! I was in the middle of showering, y'know!"

“*Sta zitto!* Quiet! Other people will notice!”

“Don’t come in if you don’t wanna be noticed.”

He waved his hand dismissively, as if shooing away a stray dog that was in the way.

Fortunately, Shizuri hadn’t noticed Kanon’s doffed outfit. That being said, there was no guarantee his good luck would persist indefinitely. He had to get Shizuri to leave before that happened.

The next moment, however, she did the exact opposite of what he expected.

“...Wouldn’t *you* be inconvenienced if someone noticed?”

Dauntlessly, Shizuri approached Kojou as he stood there with nothing more than a towel wrapped around him.

“What do you mean?”

Cowed by the mysterious intensity she exuded, Kojou questioned her back in a trembling voice. He was worried that it was already no longer possible to cover up Kanon’s presence.

Shizuri stopped right in front of him, reaching her index finger out and gently pressing it to his lips.

“I am speaking of—vampiric urges.”

“!!”

His heart jumped. He tried to force himself to remain calm, but it was too late. The momentary expression that came over him changed Shizuri’s prediction into conviction. She shook her head with exasperation.

“I am your *former watcher*. Did you really think you could pull wool over my eyes? No matter how much you drink and eat, the thirst in your throat will not subside, yes?”

Speaking as if lecturing a young child, Shizuri took off her sword belt, placing the long sword with its scabbard onto the bench. Next, without fanfare, she began unfastening the buttons of her uniform, exposing the cleavage of her modest breasts and a floral-patterned bra.

“H...hey?!”

“The ‘Demon Sanctuary of Iroise’...my homeland...no longer exists.”

Cheeks burning red, Shizuri spoke in a strong tone of voice. She was equally embarrassed. Even so, Shizuri’s hands did not stop removing her clothes. She looked straight up at Kojou with a sober, serious gaze.

“No matter how much I may wish to, I cannot regain Iroise. However, Itogami Island is different. There’s still time to return to those peaceful days. Your power is necessary for this purpose.”

Stripping off her skirt, Shizuri reached her hands out to embrace Kojou. But instead, he backed off as far as the wall, as though rebuffing her.

“Cas, you can’t...!”

“A-are you dissatisfied with me?! Are you saying that since you engaged in such acts once prior, you have no further use for my body...?!”

Her features stiffened as her voice trembled with hurt. Shizuri’s eyes moistened even as he watched.

Kojou swiftly and heavily shook his head.

“Not that, idiot. It’s not that at all!”

“I-idiot?! Did you just call me an idiot?”

“Right now, my thirst ain’t no ordinary vampiric urges. I can’t control myself anymore.”

Reaching a hand out to push her away, he averted his gaze from her disrobed body.

“You can’t control yourself...?”

She blinked several times. He exhaled painfully, raggedly.

“It’s not...gonna end with taking just a little blood from a spirit medium. I’ll keep on consuming power without limit until this thirst is sated. No way can I go ahead and drink from you if I can’t even guarantee your life!”

“Then that’s all the more reason you *should* pick me!”

Shouting with irritation, Shizuri forced Kojou to press his hands against her breasts...beneath her bra, at that. The raw sensation conveyed through his palm brought his mind to a screeching halt.

“Wha...?”

“I am an ogre. If the body of other girls can’t satisfy you, I shall please you with mine.”

“N-no...that’s...”

Kojou opened and shut his mouth like a fish flopping around on land. With all reason seared away, he could no longer resist Shizuri’s temptations. She gave her jaw a little *lift*, moving her refined face close to his as if going in for a kiss.

Just then, there came a *knock, knock* from someone at the changing room door.

Coming back to their senses with a *gasp*, Kojou and Shizuri looked at each other’s faces, flustered and panicked.

“—Akatsuki-senpai. May I come in?”

The voice he heard across the changing room door belonged to Yukina. As Kojou’s watcher, she was no doubt well aware he was in the shower. Perhaps she’d come to check on him because he’d been taking an unusually long time. It would be impossible to get through this by pretending he was not there. On top of that, the changing room entrance was set up so that you couldn’t lock it from the inside.

“Why is Yukina Himeragi here?!”

At her wits’ end, Shizuri pressed close against Kojou with a reproachful look. He fiercely shook his head.

“Hell if I know...! Just hide already!”

“Hide where?!”

She looked around the area before locking her gaze onto a corner of the changing room. Standing there was a locker for storing cleaning supplies.

“Senpai, I am coming in.”

The tone of Yukina's voice grew stronger. Perhaps she thought the noise was suspicious.

"W-wait, Himeragi!"

Kojou hastily pressed upon the inner side of the door to prevent it from opening. Yukina, however, forced the door open with an unexpected exhibition of strength.

"What are you so nervous abo—?! If you weren't dressed yet, you should have said something...!"

"That's why I told you to wait, sheesh."

Confirming that Shizuri had finished hiding in the locker by a hairbreadth, Kojou let out a sigh of relief. If he could use being in the middle of showering as an excuse, he could send Yukina away to resolve the situation immediately.

However, a grave look came over Yukina as she looked up at his visage. The earnestness of her gaze bewildered him.

"Senpai, what's with your hair...?"

"Hair?"

Touching his still-damp locks, Kojou turned his eyes toward a mirror on the wall.

Superstition would have it that mirrors did not reflect vampires, but this applied only to a particular subset of the furniture. At least he'd never had any trouble using them.

In that large, horizontal mirror was a very familiar sight.

He saw a slender, muscular physique with only a bath towel wrapped around his hips. He saw a very plain face with a languid look in the eyes.

But for some reason, on that day alone, he felt as though he gave off an impression so vivid he was almost like another person entirely.

That was undoubtedly due to the gorgeous blond locks, which changed color depending on the angle you viewed it from.

Yes, at some point, Kojou's hair had changed to a spectacular shade of blond.

“What the heeeeeeck?!”

He shrieked at the mirror hanging in front of him. His hair was completely blond, without a hint of bleach or dye, as though it had regrown entirely. He came off very much like a punk from out in the sticks with frighteningly poor taste, although perhaps that was an issue with his face to begin with.

“You didn’t do this yourself, senpai?”

Yukina asked this as she touched Kojou’s hair.

“There’s no way I could pull off something this fancy!!”

He gave a corner-cutting retort. The Third Primogenitor, Giada Kukulkin, could alter her appearance and even her gender at will, but he had no such ability, of course.

Kojou couldn’t tell when he’d gone blond—but the vampiric urges that kept assaulting him were probably the root cause.

Perhaps Kanon and Shizuri had noticed the change in him, but neither girl had broached the subject. Both of them had hair that was plenty spectacular in color to begin with, so neither probably had much reason to go out of their way and make a fuss about it.

“Aw man,” muttered Kojou, messing around with his bangs.

“I’m pretty sure Natsuki will say something if she sees me like this. What are the hair regulations for our school again?”

“*That’s* the first thing you’re worried about...?”

Yukina sighed, exasperated. Then, shaking her head as she composed herself, she looked up at Kojou with her usual overly serious expression.

“Besides, isn’t there a more pressing issue at hand right now?”

“Issue?”

“—Vampiric. Urges.”

“Ah, er...well...”

Feeling a sense of déjà vu at his conversation with her, Kojou vaguely hedged his answer.

His turmoil over the change in the color of his hair did not mean he'd been freed from his vampiric urges that had been hounding him up until moments before. If anything, he was nearly at his limits after enduring so much *teasing*.

On top of that, since Yukina had just showered herself, the heated glow of her flesh and her freshly washed hair were oddly sensuous. She remained unaware of this as she drew close to him.

"I am your watcher, senpai. Did you really think you could deceive my eyes? You've been suffering from vampiric urges ever since the rampage back at the station, haven't you?"

"No...you're wrong, Himeragi... That's..."

Kojou covered his mouth, trying to conceal the throbbing of his canine teeth. Yukina's gaze remained full of earnestness and obligation as she gently loosened the necktie of her uniform.

"Senpai. If my blood will suffice..."

"...I'm trying to tell you, that's no good. I won't drink your blood, Himeragi."

Averting his eyes from her neck, he attempted to thrust her away.

Yukina grasped Kojou's hand, her eyes wavering with visible concern.

"...What's the meaning of this? Is it because there's someone else you...I... You...would rather drink from...?"

"No, I'm telling you, it's not like that at all..."

What kind of logic is that? thought Kojou, twisting his lips.

"If I drank your blood right now, my brakes wouldn't work anymore, so I'd end up going all the way..."

"A-all the...way..."

She made an audible *gulp*. For just an instant, she lowered her eyes in fear, touching the ring on her left hand. Then she steeled her resolve as she lifted her face once more.

"Please...take responsibility, okay?"

"What...?!"

As Yukina embraced him and leaned her body into his, her cheeks reddened, and he felt a sensation akin to dizziness. With his final shreds of reason beaten down, he slid his hands around her back just as his urges commanded.

The next moment, he heard an adorable *achoo* from the shower room, which halted his movements. It was Kanon sneezing, left there in her underwear.

“Achoo...?”

Yukina’s expression suddenly went rigid as she slowly turned her attention toward the glass door of the shower.

“Is someone in there?”

“N-nobody’s there. No way anyone would be, right?”

Kojou responded to her strangely glacial voice with a hasty shake of his head.

As he barred the way with both arms spread out, Yukina calmly pushed him aside. For some reason, he sensed that the bloodlust radiating from her entire body was directed squarely at him.

“Then there’s nothing wrong with me entering, is there?”

“No, no, that’s bad. You can’t do something as, uh, impure as goin’ into a shower room after a guy just used it.”

“Please step aside!”

Kojou was earnestly trying to persuade her when she moved his hand aside with a *snap*. The blow barely brushed him, but the ferocious pain it transmitted to his wrist made him let out a fervent yelp.

“Wait! It might be a passing household spirit or something!”

“All the more reason a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency cannot overlook this!”

“Whoa?!”

“Augh!!”

When Yukina thrust Kojou aside, he lost his balance and crashed into the locker behind him.

It was an old locker of steel construction for storing cleaning supplies. The force of his impact made the door open, sending mops, scourers, and the half-naked girl within tumbling out. Kojou also toppled over and ended up tangled with her on the floor.

“Owww...”

“What is the meaning of this, Kojou...? Are you trying to crush me...?”

Shizuri, who was pinned beneath him, shoved his shoulders and glared at him resentfully.

Yukina stared down dumbfounded at them jumbled up.

“M-Miss Kasugaya...? What were you doing...in a place like...?”

“Y-you’re wrong, Himeragi. Don’t misunderstand.”

“Th-that’s right, Yukina Himeragi. I wasn’t trying to jump ahead of you or anything...!”

Kojou and Shizuri remained mutually entwined as they blurted out excuses.

The next moment, an *achoo* came from the shower room once again.

Without another word, Yukina approached the glass door, giving Kojou no time to stop her as she slid it open.

Kanon, who’d been hiding in there, poked out her head to look at Yukina and Shizuri with a strained expression.

“K-Kano?”

“Ah—...”

“Do whatever you want already,” went Kojou as he flopped onto the floor. Yukina stood in a daze. Even Shizuri was speechless.

“I am sorry, Akatsuki. You told me to hide, but...”

Kanon projected a pitiful, dejected air. Perhaps she felt guilty about slipping up and sneezing. Of course, this wasn’t a situation that she could reasonably be blamed for.

“Wh-wh-what is the meaning of this, Kojou?! What’s she doing in the shower

room...?!”

Thoroughly worked up, Shizuri straddled Kojou as she interrogated him.

Yukina glared at Shizuri as she did.

“Please don’t change the subject! Miss Kasugaya, what were you doing hiding in the locker?!”

“I-if the issue is a nighttime tryst, aren’t you just as guilty?!”

“N-nighttime tryst...?!”

Accused of misplaced anger, Yukina pressed a hand over her exposed cleavage as she yelped.

“Gimme a break...”

Kojou limply murmured in a deflated tone as Shizuri continued trying to wring his neck.

That instant, Kojou’s heart leaped with a hard *thump*. He let out an agonized scream as dizziness and throbbing overwhelmed him, as though his blood were flowing backward through his entire body. This time, his long-smoldering vampiric urges had surged beyond critical mass.

“Gr...ah...!”

“Akatsuki?!”

Kanon, the first to realize something was wrong with Kojou, went pale as she raced over.

“Ko...Kojou?”

“Senpai?!”

Shizuri and Yukina reacted virtually simultaneously. When the girls tried to sit him up, he violently thrust them aside, desperately cautioning them with a raspy voice.

“It’s no good; run for it...!”

Yukina embraced him powerfully. The soft sensation pressing against his right cheek made him stop breathing for a moment.

It was Shizuri who next hugged Kojou from his left.

He felt their body heat, the beating of their hearts, from his left and right.

“It’s all right. I’ll always be with you.”

Finally, as though addressing a tiny child, someone’s gentle voice gently tickled Kojou’s eardrums.

Kanon touched him from behind. He was in her warm embrace as his mind sank into a blank darkness.

Then sweet, alluring droplets filled his mouth.

4

She awoke to a sweet scent tickling the back of her nostrils.

Through her hazy vision, she glimpsed candy packages of differing colors displayed in a row on a shelf. Shio Hikawa narrowed her eyes as she picked up one of the pastel items she’d been stuffing her cheeks with.

“...Gummies?”

Sitting up with bewilderment, she glanced around her.

She was inside a convenience store illuminated by emergency lamps.

The shop was deserted, and its entrance and windows were shuttered. Instead, one of the walls was broken, from which outside air was blowing in. Apparently, it had ceased operating after getting caught up in the opening phase of the Electoral War. Shio had passed out in a corner of that store.

“I see... I...used up all my ritual energy...”

She shook her head a little at the folded recurve bow she was clenching in her hands.

While fleeing from the horde of Beast Vassals the Second Primogenitor had summoned, and the Fallen Dynasty’s pursuing troops, Shio had employed ritual energy beyond her limit. She must have collapsed in the process.

At some point, the sun had completely set. That meant, at minimum, she’d

been sleeping five to six hours straight. On top of that, her entire body ached like her muscles were on fire. She'd overused her physical enchantment.

The silver lining was that she had no external wounds, but for the time being, fighting at full strength would be out of the question. *Can I really protect Aurora from the Second Primogenitor in this state?* When that thought crossed her mind, she gasped and lifted her head.

"Aurora? Where are you? Aurora Florestina!"

Wobbling as she rose to her feet, Shio called out the name of the girl she was supposed to protect.

She vaguely remembered that just before passing out, she'd fled into that convenience store with Aurora in order to lose their pursuers. The problem was what had happened after that.

Since Shio hadn't been able to move, Aurora might have left her to head off on her own. It was also conceivable the Second Primogenitor had captured her alone. Of all the possibilities she could think of, that was the worst-case scenario. In her current state, Shio's odds of rescuing her again were practically zero. As fear and regret afflicted her, Shio's shoulders trembled.

As if responding to her call, something moved on the other side of the store shelves. She heard a light patter of steps as a tiny silhouette poked its head out.

"...A dog?"

Shio was staring at an unfamiliar puppy who was amiably wagging its tail.

It was a Havanese with golden fur. Though it seemed reserved somehow, it approached Shio nonetheless. In her mind, the sight overlapped with that of the girl she knew as Aurora.

"Aurora...is that you? What are you doing, looking like that?"

She squatted down and picked up the puppy.

Apparently, vampires of the Third Primogenitor's bloodline had the ability to transform into ferocious beasts and birds of prey. If this was true, it would not be so strange if an artificial vampire like Aurora could do the same.

Having convinced herself of this, she addressed the canine.

“Sorry to make you worry like that. I’m all right.”

Shio was speaking quite seriously when the Havanese began licking her cheek.

She laughed and squirmed. She was happy that she’d finally conveyed her feelings to the girl. No matter what form Avrora might take, Shio was simply happy to know she was safe.

“Ah-ha-ha...cut it out, Avrora. That tickles.”

“Uu...uu...”

“Uu?”

Hearing an odd voice from behind her, Shio turned around with the dog still in her arms.

A blond girl wearing a hooded coat was standing there wearing a particularly conflicted expression. Unable to comprehend what was occurring, Shio looked between the girl’s face and the puppy’s.

The blond girl—the real Avrora—opened her mouth in a timid pout.

“Th-the little one I am not.”

“Oooops...r-right. I thought that was strange. Oh, and this guy’s a boy, too...”

Shio swiftly put down the Havanese. He raced around Shio’s feet with apparent regret. Avrora glared at him with a twinge of jealousy before offering Shio something in her hand: an unopened plastic bottle.

“This is?”

Shio asked as she took the PET bottle.

Her reaction caused Avrora to glance at her with upward eyes.

“Wintry drops that gush from the Spirit Peaks—may they heal thine thirst.”

“A mineral water PET bottle...er, merchandise from this store?”

“Th-there is no need for concern. The treasures Mimori left are abundant.”

Speaking these words, Avrora pointed to indicate a pouch suspended beneath her collarbone. It was the sort of purse one wore around the neck. The interior of the pouch was chock-full of small change. The sight of her looking proud as

she showed this off was just adorable. She was like a little girl who'd been entrusted to run an errand for the first time in her life. It seemed she'd picked up enough common sense to know paying for merchandise was the right thing to do.

“Mimori Akatsuki... Kojou Akatsuki's mother, huh?”

Shio recalled Mimori Akatsuki as she poured the mineral water Avrora handed her down her throat.

Shio and the others had met Mimori in the dead of the previous night. It had been right around the time one day changed into the next.

While visiting Blue Elysium during their time off, Shio and Yuiri had wound up saving Mimori and Avrora from a group of armed pursuers. As far as the two girls were concerned, this development was a completely unanticipated turn of events, but apparently it was actually part of a plan Mimori had concocted. For some reason, she'd been aware of their visit to Blue Elysium.

Mimori had made two requests of them.

The first was to protect the recently awakened twelfth of the Kaleid Bloods from her MAR pursuers.

The second was to bring her to Kojou Akatsuki's side.

Thus, she entrusted the girl named Avrora to Shio and Yuiri. No, it was more accurate to say that she pushed her onto them.

But since she told them doing so was required to bring the Electoral War to an end, there was no way they could refuse.

Even if that weren't the case, as members of the Lion King Agency, they couldn't simply abandon a Kaleid Blood, a portion of the Fourth Primogenitor.

After handing over Avrora to Shio and Yuiri, Mimori Akatsuki had immediately set off somewhere to draw away the men running after her. She was very much a whimsical woman dancing to her own tune.

Shio didn't know where she ended up after that.

And then Shio, Yuiri, and Avrora had crossed over to Itogami Island, only for the Second Primogenitor to give chase.

“Thank you. That was good.”

Drinking the bottle dry, Shio smiled at Avrora. As a matter of fact, the replenishing mineral water did make her feel like she'd recovered a fair bit of physical energy.

“Indeed.”

Seeing that Shio was satisfied, Avrora nodded with delight. It was the reaction of a puppy being praised for doing a trick. You really wouldn't think she was a piece of the World's Mightiest Vampire.

“The first thing we need to do to rendezvous with Kojou Akatsuki is escape the Second Primogenitor's sphere of influence. Can you walk?”

“O-of course.”

Even as an expression of worry came over her, Avrora nodded as stoutly as she could. Then, however, she immediately lowered her eyes, seemingly in consideration for Shio.

“But the sword maiden and the dragon girl...”

“I think the Second Primogenitor captured Yuiri and Glenda.”

Shio murmured this casually as she gazed at the lack of a recent call history on her smartphone.

It had already been half a day since Yuiri and Glenda had taken on the role of decoys and had gone their separate ways. Since there had been no contact from them since, it was natural to conclude they were in a situation where communication wasn't permitted. At this point, all Shio could do was pray for her friends' safety.

“Their sacrifice adds to the crimes weighing upon mine shoulders.”

Avrora spoke in an exceedingly dejected tone.

“It's not like that. We're the ones who weren't powerful enough to keep you from going through all this peril.”

Shio shook her head and gave a frail reply, saying it to herself more than Avrora.

“We’ll definitely save them. But we can’t do that now. To resist the vampire primogenitors, we need the power of a fellow primogenitor—to save Yui and Glenda, I need to get you to Kojou Akatsuki.”

“Kojou...”

Vitality returned to the girl’s eyes the instant his name came up. Her reaction surprised Shio a little. As far as Avrora was concerned, the boy named Kojou Akatsuki really was something special.

The moment the vampire got psyched up, something fell out of her coat pocket. It was a small pouch of colorful candies, a package of gummies that had already been opened. Apparently, she’d eaten these to soothe her empty stomach while Shio had been out.

“I—I have already offered fair compensation...!”

Avrora hastily excused herself, probably assuming Shio was going to scold her for laying hands on the merchandise without permission. When she tried to lift up the pouch, her face that of the most pitiable girl in the world, gummies spilled out from her hand.

Seeing this, Shio burst into a fit of laughter.

“I’m a bit hungry, too. Go ahead and eat whatever you like. I’ll pay for anything you can’t cover.”

“W-woooow!”

Avrora’s eyes glimmered at Shio’s generous proposal.

As Shio observed the girl peruse the sweets, she abruptly realized how strange it was that there were still untouched goods left in the shop.

The convenience store had suspended operations because the busted wall prevented it from closing securely. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t have been strange for heartless people to have seen it as a target ripe to plunder and loot it completely, so the risk should have been even greater since the Island Guard was all but destroyed.

The simple reason no one had done that was because they hadn’t needed to.

Certainly, the effects of the Electoral War had interrupted the flow of goods,

but MAR was providing an abundance of foodstuffs and supplies in their place—and virtually for free at that. She'd heard that MAR was also shouldering the costs for repair and compensation of homes and stores destroyed in the proceedings.

Lifelines such as power and water utilities were functioning without any issues at present. Hence, the ordinary citizens of Itogami Island could spectate the Electoral War like it was some kind of sporting event.

However, even an enormous conglomerate like MAR wasn't so rich that it could simply shrug off such vast expenditures. Neither did she imagine that the Order of the End was paying them enough that the profits outweighed shouldering that burden.

If that was the case, then why on earth was MAR cooperating with the Electoral War—?

Shio stopped breathing as she searched for an answer to that question.

She had a very bad feeling about this. She was worried they'd missed something, something critically important. There could be another dark side to the Electoral War that she wasn't yet aware of.

However, before she could arrive at the truth behind her anxieties, Shio's thoughts were pulled back to reality.

Because suddenly, Avrora cowered on the spot and loosed an agonized moan.

"Avrora...?"

"Uu...ghh..."

When Shio rushed over, Avrora squirmed around as though trying to thrust her away.

The air around Avrora grew frigid as her unintentional dispersal of demonic energy pricked at Shio's skin.

Demonic energy was pouring from Avrora's body. She wasn't doing this consciously. Somehow, an external stimulus had forced it into an agitated state.

"Demonic energy...resonance? Has something happened to Kojou Akatsuki?!"

Shio's palms broke out in a sweat.

Something with even greater demonic energy than the Beast Vassal inside Avrora, who was a piece shorn from the Fourth Primogenitor, was trying to awaken. It was as though a beast were responding to the distant howls of its comrades.

But this phenomenon was also dangerous; it could potentially expose them to enemy forces.

"Be...still...Glacies...!"

Hugging her narrow shoulders, Avrora let out a pained wail. Then her emission of demonic energy abruptly terminated; perhaps her request had rung true. Quiet returned to the dimly lit interior of the store.

Unfortunately, they didn't have the luxury to bask in relief.

Avrora had been suffering from the resonance for an entire minute. That was plenty of time for the Second Primogenitor to figure out where she was.

"Let's leave the store, Avrora. They might have deduced your location."

"Under...stood..."

Avrora wobbled as she rose to her feet. Approaching the broken wall, Shio held her silver recurve bow at the ready. Then she poked her head out of the gap to examine the state of the street outside.

It hadn't even been two minutes since the demonic energy resonance phenomenon occurred, three at most. There had to be at least a little time before the Second Primogenitor's subordinates showed up.

But in the brief moment that passed through Shio's mind, the nighttime street brightened with a dazzling radiance.

A mist of fresh blood swirled out from thin air and changed into the form of a beast.

It had become a carnivorous dinosaur that walked on two legs. Though comparatively small for one, it still easily exceeded three meters in length.

Its body flickered like a flame, indicating that it was a beast summoned from

another world. In other words, it was a mass of demonic energy so dense as to possess sentience—a vampire’s Beast Vassal.

“A dinosaur...! Summoned by the Second Primogenitor?!”

Shio exclaimed in a low voice and bit her lip.

It was indeed possible for a vampire to send their Beast Vassals somewhere instantaneously, ignoring terrain and distance. Shio’s plan to flee before the enemy arrived had been torn to shreds.

However, the dinosaur-type Beast Vassal had yet to notice Shio and Avrora inside the convenience store. Since the Second Primogenitor was controlling it from a far-off distance, even she couldn’t have ascertained Shio and Avrora’s precise location.

Maybe we can just wait for it to go by, Shio thought, but a moment after embracing that slender hope, Shio beheld an incredible sight.

The puppy with golden fur was barking right at the Beast Vassal.

The canine continued to yap with sharp *ruff, ruff* sounds as the Beast Vassal glared at it darkly.

The dog must have been operating instinctively to instill fear in the familiar. However, it had the complete opposite effect. Reacting less to the sound than to the puppy’s hostility, the Beast Vassal automatically entered an offensive stance.

“The little one is...!”

Raising her voice in a plaintive cry, Avrora rushed out toward him.

“Wha...?!”

Shio gazed dumbfounded behind her. Certainly, with Avrora’s power—if she unleashed the power of the Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor slumbering within her, she could save that little puppy.

But if she did that, Avrora would not go unscathed.

In the worst-case scenario, she would vanish then and there; and with its host lost, the twelfth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor would begin running

amok. Itogami Island itself might get blown away in the process.

The only way to keep the girl from using that Beast Vassal was for Shio to defeat the dinosaur beforehand.

“I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee!”

Holding her silver recurve bow in place, Shio notched a cursed arrow. Pouring all the ritual energy into it that she could muster, she aimed to the limits of her precision.

Even with Freikugel Plus’s maximum power output, it wouldn’t be enough to win in a head-on collision with a primogenitor’s Beast Vassal. Wringing out her ritual energy to the greatest extent possible, she could only focus all its power on a single point.

“Let there be light—!”

Unleashed with a roar, the cursed arrow generated countless overlapping magic circles.

After amplifying Shio’s ritual energy several times over, the arrow transformed into a ray of light that pierced through the creature’s heart.

The collision between vast demonic energy and ritual energy was a tug-of-war lasting for but a single moment.

After what felt like an eternity, an incredible explosion erupted.

Itogami Island’s artificial soil shuddered and trembled. The glass of the buildings in the area shattered all at once. The beam blinded Shio’s vision. By the time the light had faded, the Second Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal had vanished without a trace. All that remained was a fan-shaped crater in the ground.

“Shio!”

Returning with the puppy in her arms, Aurora let out a yelp as she saw her protector fall to her knees.

“Don’t come any closer, Aurora...! You need...to get away, at least...”

Shio shouted this, mustering up the little strength left in her.

The carnivorous dinosaur Freikugel Plus's ritual spell artillery attack had destroyed was already starting to regenerate. Destroying a primogenitor's Beast Vassal was truly impossible with solely the power Shio possessed.

She didn't have the ritual energy remaining to let loose another artillery shot. The only thing she could do was to make Avrora run as far away as possible.

The other girl, however, extended a hand to Shio in a desperate plea.

"Unacceptable. Thy duty was to lead me to Kojou's side and save the sword maiden thereafter, was it not?!"

"Sorry...but as I am now, I..."

Shio frailly shook her head, trying to rebuff Avrora.

The Second Primogenitor's familiar had already finished regenerating; the eyes it turned toward Shio and Avrora glowed like flames.

Despite knowing it was futile, Shio pulled out an offensive ritual spell tablet and went on guard.

The next moment, a voice rang out in their ears.

"—Don't move, either of you."

"Huh?!"

Shio and Avrora obeyed, suddenly prodded by a call out of nowhere that lacked any sense of tension. It was the voice of a boy Shio didn't recognize.

Suddenly, a gust of wind erupted before her eyes, sweeping up dust to rob her of her vision and leaving her bewildered.

She could no longer see her opponent, but that surely went both ways. Instead, she heard footsteps off in the distance. Then she heard voices that were just like Shio's and Avrora's.

It dawned on Shio that the voices were fabrications. Someone was manipulating sound to make it seem like she and Avrora were running away.

Yet the blowing wind was nothing but that. She didn't sense any magical energy whatsoever. In a blinded state, even a vampire primogenitor wouldn't be able to discern that the footsteps were fabrications.

And so, the carnivorous dinosaur departed, chasing after the false sounds of its targets.

After checking to ensure the Beast Vassal's aura had vanished, a slightly absent expression came over Shio. Aurora, puppy in hand, sank down and sat, exhausted.

"Man, seems like I just managed to fool it. Maybe that Beast Vassal's intelligence was dino level, too?"

From across the still-raging dust storm, they heard a flippant voice.

Shio lifted her face and examined the speaker.

He was a high school-age boy wearing rugged-looking private wear.

His hair was short and combed back. He wore thick, over-the-ear headphones. Nothing on his person came across as a weapon. Neither did he seem to be a wielder of ritual spells, and yet...

"Thou...! Why art thou...?!"

Gazing up at the boy, Aurora opened her eyes wide in total surprise. Shio couldn't hide her bewilderment over the girl's unexpected reaction.

"Well, that makes me happy. So you remember me, Aurora baby?"

Looking back at the befuddled Aurora, he narrowed his eyes with what seemed like nostalgia. Then, pulling off his headphones and placing them around his neck, he turned toward Shio and offered his right hand in the chummiest of fashions.

"Motoki Yaze of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. I've come to lend you a hand, Shio Hikawa."

5

He had a dream. A vision of a little girl with golden hair stuffing gummy candy into her mouth.

"Avro...ra?"

As he awoke, the familiar contours of her face sank into the far reaches of oblivion and vanished.

Feeling a wrenching sense of loss in his chest, Kojou opened his eyes amid the darkness.

He was in a cramped room that had once been constructed as a prison cell. It was the dorm they'd assigned him. He didn't know at what point he'd returned. His memories of what happened after the shower room were vague.

Kojou's whole body felt sluggish and heavy, like it wasn't his own.

Both his arms were numb. His fingers were without feeling. Even so, Kojou shook his body and tried to force himself into a sitting position.

That instant, a strange sensation met his right palm. It was a stretchy, soft feeling, pleasingly cool yet warm at the same time. In fact, it was so pleasant to the touch that he wanted to sink his hand right in.

"What's this softness...?"

Squinting through the darkness, Kojou almost had a coughing fit on the spot. He was blithely grasping Yukina's bare breasts as she continued to sleep with her clothes undone.

"Whoa...?!"

His head full of proverbial question marks, Kojou yanked his hand back, quickly tidying up Yukina's crooked bra to hide the evidence.

However, he had no time to be relieved, for he realized that something soft was embracing his left flank. Lying facedown as she slept, Shizuri's entire half-naked form was wrapped tightly around his arm.

Moreover, what he'd mistaken for a pillow was actually Kanon in her underwear.

Oblivious to what had happened prior to this, he'd continued sleeping, embracing the trio in their most immodest state as if they were hugging pillows.

On top of that, Kojou himself was buck naked, not a single stitch of clothing on him. Even if they chided him for it later, he couldn't complain about the spectacle.

“How the hell did I wind up like this...? What happened?!”

Kojou was completely at a loss, but none of the three girls replied to his question. They seemed not so much asleep as unconscious from fatigue.

“I see...all three of them...stopped my vampiric urges...”

Memories started flitting back to him as he became racked with a ferocious sense of guilt.

Losing himself to the urges, he'd attacked Yukina and the others and absorbed their spiritual energy until they were no longer able to move. The trio had spiritual energy far beyond that of any normal person, so the fact they'd passed out rudely awakened him to how reckless he'd been. If it hadn't been them involved, it wouldn't have surprised him if someone wound up losing their life.

“Uu...”

Sensing a metallic scent and a throb at the back of his nostrils, Kojou swiftly averted his eyes from all three girls. The sensation of their soft flesh had come rushing back to him, threatening to reinstate his cravings once more.

“I drank that much, and it's still not enough...?”

Kojou pulled up the blanket to cover their bodies. He had some lingering regrets, but now wasn't the time to voice them.

Pulling his eyes away from Yukina's and the others' sleeping faces, he put on some fresh, folded clothes.

The outfit Nina had provided for him was just like the school uniform and parka Kojou normally wore. They didn't look any different, but right now he was grateful for that.

“Mm... Sen...pai...”

Abruptly, Yukina let out those bewitching words in the middle of her sleep. This was followed by Kanon and Shizuri also making oddly sexy noises as they slept. His shoulders trembled each time.

Painfully aware that his body would never hold out if he stayed put, he practically fled the room.

It was already the dead of night, but he sensed a fair number of people inside the lab.

Even at this hour, Kensei Kanase and Nina were continuing to treat the injured Astarte. On other floors, lab workers unfamiliar to Kojou and the others seemed to be at work. He could see guards on duty as well.

Opting to walk down a deserted-looking path so that no one would spot him, he easily slipped outside the building. It wasn't that the security guards were monkeys; they were just that short-staffed.

The outer wall and ceiling Kojou had punched through during his battle with The Blood the night before remained broken and abandoned. Gazing up at the sky from the artificial isle's bowels, he saw it beautifully packed full of stars.

Kojou continued walking around town, still staring at the silvery moon. The nighttime breeze felt good against his heated body. But this pleasant feeling didn't last for long.

Sensing an unnerving gaze pricking at his flesh, he ground his feet with irritation. Even he was surprised at how sharp his senses had become.

"Come on out."

Kojou suddenly called out to the back of the darkness. He behaved rudely and provocatively, making sure not to neglect beckoning whoever it was with his hand.

Responding to his taunt, figures emerged from the shadow of the building one by one. There were three in all. Each wore a metal bracelet around a wrist.

"What, yer still a brat ain'tcha? Tryin' to act all cool."

A demon man glared at Kojou as he spat that out. He was large—the spitting image of a hoodlum.

Most likely he was a gigas variant able to use spirit magic. But it was all the same to Kojou.

"Alone, huh? You've got guts."

"Vampire...are you the ruler candidate of this domain, brat?"

“Huuuh? Whatever weird ideas you got in your heads, I don’t look anything like Natsuki, okay?”

Kojou grimaced in annoyance at their questions. Apparently, they hadn’t even gotten the memo that the ruler who’d subjugated the vicinity was none other than the Witch of the Void. That meant they were rogue ruler candidates, recent arrivals in Island North that just happened to be inspecting the premises.

“Never mind all of that; just get out of here...!”

Kojou warned them in a low voice. The beasts inside him were reacting, egged on by the hostility of the men. He couldn’t contain the ferocious emotions that were pouring out from him.

Watching him agonizingly grit his teeth, the men broke into scornful laughter.

“Ahh?”

“I’m telling you to get away from me! You got a death wish?!”

Glaring back at them, he shouted in fury. Kojou had already reached the limits of his self-control.

For a moment, the men were shocked into silence; the next instant, however, it was evident he’d fanned the flames of their ire. They no doubt felt Kojou was taking them for weaklings.

“You brat!”

“Don’t get ahead of yerself!”

“—You stupid jerks!”

Kojou watched with a desperate expression as the group activated spirit magic spells.

Then a torrent of demonic energy shimmering like black flames gushed out from his back.

Adopting the form of wings, they mowed down the men’s huge bodies.

A burst of wind raced down the street, digging into the surface of the ground. Several roadside trees blew away, roots and all, and streetlight poles bent and broke.

The rogue demons were unable to even raise a cry as the gale slammed them into the building behind them. The ominous sound of their bones breaking reverberated as fresh blood spilled from their mouths. Then the wings sprouting from Kojou's back became giant blades and impaled them.

The pitch-black wings undulated with delight as they sucked fresh blood and demonic energy from his foes' bodies.

"Senpai?! That demonic energy just now... What in the world was...?!"

He saw Yukina rush out of the laboratory, gripping her silver spear. By all rights, she shouldn't have been in any condition to move yet, but she'd no doubt diligently pursued Kojou as soon as she'd noticed his absence.

"That's...?!"

Noticing the things protruding from him, Yukina found herself aghast, unable to move.

Exhausted of strength, Kojou went down to his knees then and there as the pitch-black wings vanished. Since they'd completely consumed the demonic energy of the gigas men, they had lost their reason to remain materialized.

Kojou's entire body was drenched with sweat as he breathed raggedly over and over.

It wasn't because he was feeling pain. Quite the opposite.

He'd brandished overwhelming power to trample his foes. And he'd stolen the very life force from them.

The incredible pleasure he'd felt throughout the process filled him with terror, made his thoughts grow distant. He was awash in cravings and urges; at this rate, he felt as though he would cease to be himself.

"Senpai..."

Though Yukina's expression was stiff with fear, she raced to Kojou's side.

A moment afterward, a booming voice reverberated across the city just as it had quieted once more. It was a laughing, jovial tone.

"Ohhh, ohhh... My, you've done something brutal yet again, boy. Scary,

scary.”

Looking down upon the fainted gigas was a tall and athletic foreigner. He wore baggy cargo pants and work boots, topping off the rugged getup with a black tank top.

“You’re...!”

“The First Primogenitor... Lord...Ki Juranbarada?!”

Kojou and Yukina exclaimed at the same time. The tall man—Ki—seemed somehow sullen, now bearing a resentful look.

“What, you figured out who I really am already? Must’ve been Aradahl’s doing... Damn him for stealing a man’s fun. And I thought I’d surprise you and everything.”

Ki kicked away a clod of earth, acting like a child whose prank had gone sour.

Kojou and Yukina continued to stare, taken aback at seeing the First Primogenitor like this. He looked genuinely rueful, nothing you would expect from the ruler of the Warlord’s Empire, the oldest and mightiest of the Dominions.

“Well, fine. Thanks to this I got to see something real interesting.”

Shaking his head ever so slightly to ward off his thoughts, Ki smiled in a leering, impetuous manner. He wasn’t what you’d call a pretty boy, but strangely, the man’s every gesture made him look attractive.

“What the heck are you doing here...?”

Kojou stood up and went on guard.

Previously, they’d unexpectedly crossed paths at an airport in Aldegia and that was it, but now things were different. Ki was revealing to Kojou that he’d come to Itogami Island as a participant in the Electoral War.

If Ki, the First Primogenitor, genuinely wanted the seat of Itogami Island’s ruler, a clash between him and Kojou was inevitable. It wouldn’t be surprising if he started up a duel to the death on the spot.

However, Ki simply stood there defenseless, smiling with delight as he gazed

upon Kojou.

“Don’t give off all that bloodlust, boy. I came all this way to see you ’cause I was worried.”

“...Do you know what’s going on with my body?”

Keeping his guard up, Kojou prodded him back for answers.

He must have noticed the abnormal changes in Kojou’s body if he was saying he was worried. There was a slim chance he might have had an idea about what was causing it. After all, as a vampire primogenitor, he was Kojou’s senior by leaps and bounds.

“Ahhh, well of course I know that. Haven’t you realized it yourself by now?”

Ki replied with an easygoing tone.

Kojou went *ghh* as he clenched his teeth. The First Primogenitor’s assertion was true. He already knew the cause of the transformation. He was just afraid to acknowledge it.

“Senpai?”

Yukina shifted a bewildered gaze toward Kojou.

When he remained silent, Ki called out to him in an amused manner.

“At this rate, it’ll start up again.”

“Start? What are you...?”

Concerned, Kojou turned back to Ki. The towering First Primogenitor tilted his head for dramatic effect.

“What did they...? All that thing... Oh yeah, the Blazing Banquet.”

“The Blazing Banquet...you say...?”

The blood drained from Kojou’s entire body. “Blazing Banquet” was the name of a ceremonial ritual performed to revive the sealed Fourth Primogenitor.

In truth, however, that was simply a moniker for an indiscriminate plundering of memories over a huge target area. Anyone within the banquet’s area of effect, human and demon alike, had their memories stolen and their ability to

reason stripped, which ultimately resulted in their deaths.

“Strictly speaking, it’s not exactly the same. Though admittedly the principle is pretty similar.”

Staring at the pale Kojou, Ki smiled ferociously.

“What’s different is that last time, it was Root Avrora kicking up the banquet, while this time, Root ain’t here. That’s about it.”

“If Root’s gone, then why’s the banquet happening...?!”

Kojou closed the distance with Ki.

“Hey, hey, use your head a little, boy. You should know that without even having to think, right?”

He shook his head theatrically.

“You’re starting the banquet. Or more precisely, the Beast Vassals inside you are.”

“The Beast Vassals...?”

Yukina murmured that with skepticism. After all, she’d never encountered Root Avrora. She didn’t know the horror of the banquet.

“But senpai should have the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals under his rule...!”

“Ruling Beast Vassals?”

Surprised, Ki raised an eyebrow. This immediately gave way to a fit of laughter. He bent his tall frame forward, clutching his belly as he continued to guffaw. Kojou and Yukina watched in silence while he wiped tears from his eyes.

“That’s one hell of a good joke. Even I couldn’t pull that off.”

“Huh...?!”

Yukina’s eyes widened, as though she found this beyond belief.

Ki Juranbarada was the First Primogenitor, among the most ancient of vampires. He wasn’t like Kojou, who’d turned into the Fourth Primogenitor, an incomplete vampire, through a twist of fate. And now he was claiming Kojou

couldn't even rule his own familiars.

“Are you folks mistaking vampire Beast Vassals as tools to be used at your convenience? Beast Vassals aren't a vampire's weapons or possessions, let alone obedient pets. They're shitty, rampaging beasts that just happen to inhabit our bodies, y'see? If they think they're not getting enough to eat, they'll go off hunting on their own for sure, understand?”

“To eat...?”

Yukina narrowed her eyes.

“Demonic energy.”

Ki bore his white fangs and chuckled. Then as Kojou stood there frozen, Ki pointed straight at his heart.

“The ‘Fourth Primogenitor’ is an artificial vampire *built to become the World's Mightiest Vampire* served by twelve Beast Vassals. Thing is though, boy, you're missin' one of 'em at the moment. And when you're missing something, ya have to make up for it—your Beast Vassals know by instinct.”

“...Then how has this not happened once before this?” rebutted Kojou in a quivering tone.

Good grief, went Ki as he shrugged his shoulders.

“That means the guys you've fought till now didn't require the Fourth Primogenitor getting all serious. Don't make me spell it out. Even that brat Dimitrie ended up like 'that' when he fought with ya.”

Ki seemed almost nostalgic as he uttered the name of the vampire Kojou had once defeated in the war of the primogenitors—the name of the Warlord Empire's aristocrat said to be second to the primogenitors in power.

“But this time it's a little different. On this island there's me, that Fallgazer bastard, and even the Chaos Bride, that old hag. Your Beast Vassals realized that it's bad stuff, stayin' incomplete as ya are right now.”

“That's why they're craving demonic energy? To make up for the twelfth Beast Vassal...?!?”

“Demonic energy? Honestly, it'd be great if they stopped at just that.”

Ki curled his lips sarcastically.

“Even if you sucked up all the power from every demon on this island, there’s no guarantee it’d be equal to even one of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals. That’s why they’ve got no choice but to directly consume the sources of that demonic energy. Anger, jealousy, hate, ambition, sadness, tenacity, and the thing all these strong negative feelings coalesce into—”

“Memories, huh...”

Kojou spat the words out with a sigh. Ki nodded.

“That’s right. They consume other people’s memories to make up for the demonic energy they’re lacking. That’s the mechanism behind the Blazing Banquet—the ceremonial ritual for awakening the World’s Mightiest Vampire.”

“Then The Blood’s reason for gathering all the primogenitors upon this island...,” Yukina muttered, realizing something.

“Was to back me into a corner and make me start the Blazing Banquet whether I like it or not...?”

Kojou suppressed his anger as he finished her thought with an even tone.

Raising up the Fourth Primogenitor as a symbol of terror—according to The Blood, that was the purpose of the Electoral War.

In that case, he would certainly want to reenact the Blazing Banquet.

If the Fourth Primogenitor destroyed Itogami Island, his own territory, his infamy would be unshakable for all time.

On top of that, with his power boosted by the banquet, he had a golden opportunity to prove he deserved the title of World’s Mightiest Vampire by defeating Ki and the other primogenitors.

That was how The Blood wanted this to end. This was the truth behind the stupid mess known as the Electoral War.

“What should I do to stop this...?”

Kojou looked up at Ki and asked this. The First Primogenitor let out an exasperated sigh.

“Like I said, use your head. What’s the reason your Beast Vassals want demonic energy in the first place?”

“To compensate for the missing Beast Va...”

Midway through, Kojou swallowed the words he was on the verge of voicing.

His mind was colored with anger and despair. There was a way to stop the banquet. But Kojou didn’t accept it. He absolutely could not accept doing that.

“You realized?”

Ki Juranbarada shot him a look resembling pity.

“If you take the twelfth Beast Vassal into you and become a complete Fourth Primogenitor, the banquet will end. Consume Dodekatos and obtain your final Beast Vassal or gain power by robbing memories wholesale from everyone on this island—pick whichever one you like.”

“I...”

Kojou’s lips trembled meaninglessly.

Taking the twelfth Beast Vassal into him meant breaking the seal of the last remaining Kaleid Blood—Aurora’s seal.

Since she was constructed for the sole purpose of sealing one of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals, she would vanish once he broke the seal.

But there was no other way to stop the Blazing Banquet.

“This time, I only came to tell you that. Once you get your power, let’s take some time to play, all right?”

“Later,” said Ki with a casual wave of his hand, his entire body enveloped by black mist.

He thinned and vanished from sight, melting into the darkness.

“Wai...”

Kojou reached out to try and stop Ki, but he ended up futilely clenching his fist without having gotten in a single word.

There was nothing left to ask him or anything left to say. The man wasn’t

Kojou's mentor or even his friend. He'd just come to explain the rules, to give him some advice so that the game called the Electoral War would grow even more exciting. That was the role he'd adopted tonight.

"Senpai..."

As Kojou stood there with an agonized expression, Yukina gingerly called out to him.

However, he didn't even notice her before he walked off, wobbly and without a destination. Stumbling over a broken roadside tree, Kojou fell to his knees, crouching down on the spot.

"Aaaaauuuuggghh!!"

Pounding the ground before him, Kojou howled toward the sky.

All Yukina could do was sadly gaze at him from behind.





CHAPTER THREE DECISIONS

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1

A tall man in a tuxedo came to greet Yui Haba.

He was a foreigner with a deeply chiseled face, black hair, and black eyes—a handsome young man, like you’d see in a painting.

“Young ladies, the meal has been prepared.”

“Ah...th-thanks...”

Huddled atop a luxurious sofa, Yui bowed her head with a strained smile on her face.

Yui and Glenda were in a room in a high-end hotel neighboring Itogami Central Airport. Fallgazer had rented out an entire wing of the hotel to use as a base.

It was the morning after they’d fought the Second Primogenitor and had acted as decoys so that Shio and Aurora might escape. Actually, a better description was that they’d done nothing but run around while the Second Primogenitor’s horde of Beast Vassals gave chase.

In the end, Yui and Glenda had surrendered once the Second Primogenitor backed them against a cliff face, after which they’d been brought to that building. They had been confined there ever since.

Surprisingly, however, they weren’t being treated nearly as badly as they had anticipated.

Naturally, Yui’s smartphone had been confiscated, and they were forbidden from all other outside contact, but that was it. They hadn’t split Glenda away from Yui, nor had they inspected their personal belongings, let alone

interrogate them. On top of that, they'd brought in a skilled ritual spell doctor to fix Yuiri's sprain, with treatment of her stiff shoulders and roughed-up skin thrown in for free. It was enough to make Yuiri, a commoner, even more worried that there was some ulterior motive behind taking things that far.

"Meal? Yuiri, meal?"

Back in girl form, Glenda was jumping around and playing with her friend.

Glenda was wearing a no-slip one-piece dress. It was quite an outfit, with snap buttons on her shoulder straps and back so that it wouldn't tear even if she transformed into a dragon. Yuiri and Shio had commissioned a tailor-made dress for her.

"I shall guide you, young ladies. Please, come this way."

"Ah, yes... S-sorry."

Bewildered by the unfamiliar little rich girl treatment, Yuiri brought Glenda along as she followed behind the young man in the tuxedo. The long corridor in the five-star hotel left her spirits as heavy as if she were being led up the stairs to the gallows.

It was a little late for supper, but that was according to human sensitivities. Considering that vampires were nocturnal, this could very well be considered the start of their day. Either way, Yuiri and Glenda were captives, so they had no right to refuse.

"Wow..."

When they arrived at the banquet hall, Yuiri unwittingly let out a sigh of admiration.

Atop extravagant tableware, countless candles flickered in the night. The beautiful nighttime spectacle of this top-flight restaurant had dazzling ornamentation reminiscent of an imperial palace.

However, what shook her even more than this was that the Second Primogenitor's subordinates were acting as servants.

Actors on the silver screen couldn't even compare to how handsome the men were. Similarly, the women wearing highly revealing outfits were beauties for

the ages. In addition to those two groups, there were also stern-faced elderly gentlemen. All had gathered around to serve the Second Primogenitor, Aswadguhl Aziz, who calmly sat upon a magnificent chair resembling a royal throne. It was a dazzling, surreal place that seemed straight out of an opera stage. Yuiri was stunned speechless.

“How are your...wounds?”

The Second Primogenitor made a beautiful, charming smile as she asked Yuiri that.

“Y...yes. They are all right now.”

Sitting right across from her at a handsome servant’s invitation, Yuiri spoke those words with a stiff expression. The meal had already been placed on the table, with each dish topped by a silver lid.

The Second Primogenitor curled her red lips up into a smile.

“I see. That is...good... I engaged in rather roughshod means... Yes?”

“No...ah... We were the ones to enter your territory without permission after all...”

“Tee-hee, you should eat before your meal is cold... It is food from this nation, so I believe it will suit your...palate.”

“Ah, yes...”

Yuri replied absentmindedly. How had she, no more than an ordinary novice Attack Mage, wound up being served dinner by no less than a vampire primogenitor? No matter how she mulled it over, she couldn’t make sense of it.

A servant removed the lid covering the meal.

That instant, a deeply stimulating, familiar aroma pricked her nostrils. *Dahh*, she went, her expression brightening. A dish near and dear to her heart had been placed right in front of her.

“This Japanese food greatly resembles a dish in my own...Dynasty... We call it...curry...”

“I—I see... Now that you mention it...”

Yuiiri shoved down and hid her confusion as she nodded. Heaped upon the plate was curry rice. Not the sort that came only from high-end establishments, mind you; it was clearly prepackaged curry the general public could find anywhere.

“Curry—!”

Gripping her pure silver spoon, Glenda happily began to dig in. When Yuiiri glanced over, a satisfied expression came upon the Second Primogenitor as she brought the exact same curry to her lips. Yuiiri really couldn’t wrap her head around the minds of the wealthy, vampires or no.

“Um...Second Primogenitor...would it be all right if I asked you a question?”

Yuiiri gingerly posed an inquiry to Aswad as she added some specially made spice to heat things up, wondering if even that was quite enough.

“What, I wonder...?”

Aswad tilted a wrist as she prompted back.

Yuiiri inhaled sharply.

“Are you the genuine Malik—the genuine Fallgazer? Er, in other words, we had heard you were a man, so...”

“A man...or...a woman... Is it really necessary to obsess with such trivialities?”

The girlish Second Primogenitor brushed back her long purple hair, staring at Yuiiri with a skeptical expression.

“...Eh?! Ah...ahhh...”

Even though the unexpected reply threw her off, Yuiiri accepted it on a deep level. In other words, the Second Primogenitor, Aswadguhl Aziz, was *that* kind of person.

“Moon is moon... Flower is flower... Gemstone is gemstone... Yes...all possess beauty. Can this not all just...be? Anyone who would not accept any of these tenants is but a...fool.”

“I—I suppose you’re right...”

She'd have easily accepted if anyone else told her that, let alone by the Second Primogenitor. After all, he—or perhaps she—possessed beauty that passed beyond the boundaries of actual gender.

Aswad frostily narrowed her beautiful eyes.

“Accordingly, within the range of my eyesight, there is no need for anything that is not...beautiful. Neither the retainers of the Warlord, who are without the slightest hint of aesthetics, nor the blood kin of the Chaos Bride, who reek of beasts...”

“...?!”

Yui's expression stiffened at the hostility the primogenitor didn't even realize she was exuding.

Gazing back at her, Aswad smiled kindly.

“But with the Fourth Primogenitor of this age, I have slight...confidence...at the very least, his taste in companions is not...poor.”

“Companions...er, umm?! Do you mean us?!”

Yui pointed at her own cleavage in bewilderment.

Aswad made a bewitching smile as if she saw through everything.

“Both of you have felt the lips of the Fourth Primogenitor upon you...yes?”

“That's...umm...”

“Yes,” whispered Yui in a tiny voice. Kojou had partaken of more than a bit of blood from her and Glenda respectively. One time when Itogami Island had been in crisis, the other time to stop the encroachment of Nod. Both instances had been una— “You are fortunate...then... You have arrived in time for the banquet...”

Gazing with delight at Yui's embarrassment, Aswad murmured like so.

“Banquet...?”

“...Dah?”

Yui and Glenda glanced at each other. Neither had a clue what the term meant.

“The Blazing Banquet...the snatching of memories by the Fourth Primogenitor, and a mass outbreak of pseudo-vampirization syndrome, you...see...”

“Snatching of...memories?!”

Yui almost dropped her spoon at the Second Primogenitor’s casual explanation.

She had learned of an event with the same name from reading the files on Kojou Akatsuki. However, even she didn’t know its exact details. Besides, the records kept by the Lion King Agency were vague in and of themselves. The fact that the true nature of the Blazing Banquet was actually a pseudo-vampirization syndrome was news to her ears.

An outbreak of pseudo-vampirization syndrome turning vast numbers of people into demons overnight was one of the sorcerous disasters the Lion King Agency feared most. Normally, however, it would be impossible for a single vampire to trigger such a thing. Yes, if the source of the spread were an ordinary vampire— “Why would...Kojou do such a thing...?!”

“The Twelfth, Aurora.”

Aswad answered bluntly.

Yui widened her eyes in abject shock. Dodekatos—Aurora Florestina—had been brought to the island by none other than Glenda and herself.

“Currently, the Fourth Primogenitor lacks the twelfth Beast Vassal... Yes...this loss must be compensated for somehow... For instance, through consuming a vast quantity of demonic energy rivaling that of a primogenitor’s Beast... Vassal...”

“Is there...any way to stop that?”

Yui’s voice wavered as she asked.

Aswad smiled elegantly and stared at the girl as if she was testing her.

“There...is... It is very simple. All will be well if Dodekatos’s seal is...shattered.”

“No...! If that happens, Aurora will...”

“The choice is...yours...”

Aswad chuckled as she coldly rebuffed Yuiri.

“Save the people of Itogami Island or save Avrora... That’s what you’re saying?”

Yuii glared at Aswad, the blood drained from her face.

The purple-haired Second Primogenitor quietly shook her head.

“No...is it not, rather...whether the Fourth Primogenitor slays Dodekatos...or you...slay her...?”

“Me...kill Avrora...?”

She stared at her hands, stunned.

“If Dodekatos escapes my domain and arrives at the Fourth Primogenitor’s side, her seal shall be broken one way or...another...”

“So to kill her...before that happens...”

“Consuming her would work as well...but that would be boring...yes?”

Aswad let her white fangs protrude slightly from her lips.

Yuii said nothing in response. Glenda gazed at her speechless friend with concern.

“Young lady, we return to you that which you yielded to us.”

Yuii hung her head as the handsome young retainer of the Second Primogenitor presented something to her.

A silver long sword stored inside an instrument case.

“Rosen Chevalier Plus...”

Yuii was still ferociously in chaos as she robotically accepted the weapon.

Next, the retainer placed her smartphone on top of the table.

On the screen of the smartphone, supposedly unusable within the Second Primogenitor’s domain, was a map of Itogami City’s interior. There were two dots on the map. One was Yuiri’s current position. The other was Shio’s coordinates.

And Avrora was likely by Shio’s side.

“Yui...?”

Yui bit her lip as Glenda called out to her.

She subconsciously averted her eyes from Glenda; her pure gaze was too much to handle.

“The meal was...marvelous... Curry really should be...spicy, yes?”

Finishing her meal, the Second Primogenitor smirked with satisfaction.

Yui maintained her silence as she stared at the two blinking dots on the map.

2

“You’re late! What time do you two think it is right now?!”

When Kojou and Yukina returned to the lab, they found Shizuri waiting for them, her temple twitching and her visage as ferocious as an angry deity’s. With her coat over her uniform and her sword belt over that, she was in hair-trigger combat mode. Perhaps she’d equipped herself in haste from noticing Kojou’s brawl with the group of gigas earlier.

“...You woke up, Cas?”

“I can’t sleep soundly through such spectacular demonic energy being tossed about...!”

Shizuri glared at Kojou with reproach. Her expression said it all; there was no way she was backing down until he gave her a detailed account of what had happened. Giving up on returning to his room, Kojou headed toward the lab’s interior lounge.

Kanon was in the lounge as well, preparing tea for everyone. Nina Adelard was sitting on the table and had changed into a white doll’s outfit. Beside her was a black cat with golden eyes.

“You have quite haggard faces for a pair who dressed up for a nighttime stroll.”

Looking up at Kojou and Yukina, the black cat pointed this out with a sarcastic

tone.

“Master?”

“Professor Kitty... So you’re here, too, huh?”

Yukina’s expression hardened at the sudden appearance of her mentor. Kojou lethargically lowered his shoulders. The black cat was really the familiar of Yukari Endou, an elven Attack Mage and Yukina’s teacher. Recalling that he hadn’t seen her around earlier, he couldn’t help but wonder what she’d been up to.

“A stroll...?”

Kanon asked that while pouring a small, steaming teapot, as if wondering, *At this time of night?*

“Hoh-hoh,” went Nina, her lips curling up with glee.

“Were you going stargazing? ‘Behold, that is Arcturus, that is Spica, and that is Denebola.’ ‘My, how pretty.’ ‘Not prettier than you.’ ‘Oh, senpai.’ ...Or something of the sort?”

“...What’s with the cringey dialogue?”

Kojou shot back with a grimace. Implicit in that criticism was, *Where the hell did you come up with all that?* But for some reason, Nina ignored that and proudly puffed out her breasts.

“I saw it in a TV drama recently. I’m quite trendy, you see.”

“Abbess, that is marvelous.”

Kanon brought her hands together in front of her chest, eyes glimmering. *Oh yes, oh yes*, proclaimed Nina’s nod. He couldn’t deal with the two of them saying that stuff with straight faces.

Fearing there was no pithy comeback to be found, he slumped down with a sigh.

“Nothin’ like that. The First Primogenitor came over to pay me a little visit—that’s all.”

“The...?!”

Shizuri gawked, spitting out the tea in her mouth in the process.

"I see. So that's how it is."

The black cat exhaled gravely. Shizuri closed the distance with Yukari.

"Wh-what do you mean by this...?!"

"The source of the Fourth Primogenitor lad's vampiric urges. Good timing. Both of you, come with me."

Slowly rising up, the black cat nimbly leaped down from the table.

Perplexed, Yukina and Kojou followed her along.

Apparently, Yukari had realized the possibility of another Blazing Banquet just from hearing the First Primogenitor had contacted him. It was the "good timing" part that left Kojou and Yukina perplexed.

Yukari gave no explanation whatsoever as she continued onward, slipping through a dark corridor as she headed deeper into the lab.

They were now in a section devoted to treating and examining the wounded, which both Kojou and Yukina had visited previously. This was the place Yukina had been examined when she had been progressing toward Faux-Angelification.

"Master? Where are...?"

Yukina asked this in a guarded tone of voice. However, the black cat did not glance back as it continued onward. Shizuri had followed along as if it was the natural thing to do, but she dejectedly took her leave when Yukari glared at her.

Finally, the black cat stopped in front of a door midway down the corridor. It was a small room, and the lights were off.

"A...patient room?"

Yukina murmured this as she looked up at the nameplate hanging from the door.

Without acknowledging her, the black cat motioned twice with her tail. She was apparently telling them to open the door.

"Who's in here?"

Kojou harbored distinct concern as he opened the door.

He was immediately hit with the antiseptic odor particular to hospitals.

The room was dimly illuminated by night-lights. In place of a window was a large monitor displaying images of tropical fish swimming in an aquarium.

Backlit by the monitor, a young woman sitting in a wheelchair greeted Kojou and Yukina.

The glare didn't afford him a good look at her face, but she probably was around the same age as them. Unlike them, however, she was a painful, heart-wrenching sight; her entire body was covered by bandages, and a gypsum cast held her neck in place.

"It has been some time, Fourth Primogenitor. And you have served as his watcher with distinction, Yukina Himeragi."

Drip tubes swaying as she lifted her gaze, the girl greeted them in fleeting tones.

"That voice...! You're the one from when we were fighting Natsuki..."

"Lady...Koyomi Shizuka?!"

Kojou reflexively went on guard, while Yukina hastily straightened her posture.

"There's no need for formalities. This is an emergency...enough to make me like this."

The girl in the wheelchair—Koyomi Shizuka—smiled at her own expense and exhaled.

Koyomi Shizuka, also known as Paper Noise, was one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency— Kojou had fought her just once.

To be honest, it scarcely deserved to be called a fight. Koyomi had sent Kojou, Yukina, and Kiriha Kisaki of the Bureau of Astrology packing in an instant. The trio hadn't even been able to land a finger on her.

But now that same woman was holed up in a lab bearing grievous wounds. Someone had managed to breach Koyomi's ability, which Kojou had thought

invincible, and harm her to this extent.

“The Order of the End got you?”

He asked this in a hoarse voice. Koyomi Shizuka seemed to nod with her eyes.

“Fool that I am, I underestimated the breadth of the enemy’s might. I never imagined that a dragon would lend The Blood his aid—”

“Dragon... That bastard, huh...!”

Kojou recalled the man in the mask he’d engaged in battle the night before—a giant dragon covered in bronze scales. It wasn’t so strange for her to have lost to an enormous monster like that.

“You’ve encountered him as well?”

Koyomi spoke gently. Kojou nodded with a grim expression.

“He shrugged off a direct hit from one of my Beast Vassals.”

“Dragons, after all, are at the pinnacle of Demonkind in a different sense than vampires. An ancient dragon that has lived several millennia might well rival a vampire primogenitor in pure individual combat capability—”

“Did you call us here to warn us about that?”

“No. There’s something much more crucial that I need to convey to you in your current state. I don’t know whether you’ll consider it good news, though.”

Koyomi sighed. Kojou and Yukina turned to each other. They both had bad feelings about this.

“What do you mean?”

“The Twelfth, Aurora, has arrived on Itogami Island.”

“Wh...?!”

Yukina let out a tiny gasp. Kojou shook his head with an expression of disbelief.

“Why would she be...?!”

“You’re aware that she was in the custody of MAR in one of their medical facilities while she was in a coma, yes?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Mimori Akatsuki awakened her and escaped before entrusting her to a few Lion King Agency Attack Mages.”

She continued explaining calmly. “Ugh,” said Kojou in a low groan.

“...Left with her? You mean she escaped with Avrora without company permission?”

“I don’t know what her objective is.”

Koyomi Shizuka lowered her eyes as she sat in the wheelchair.

“However, MAR is participating in the management of the Electoral War as a conglomerate. Perhaps Mimori had clued into this. She could have been aware that the Electoral War might trigger the Blazing Banquet.”

“Did she bust Avrora out to...make me consume her...?”

Kojou closed the distance with Koyomi, his anger plain. She looked back at him coldly.

“Not for you. For the good of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Her statement silenced him. Mimori didn’t know that the Fourth Primogenitor was really Kojou.

“But...at the end of the day, that’s the same damned thing!”

“You said that Miss Avrora was entrusted to Attack Mages from the Lion King Agency, right?”

Seeing that Kojou was indignant, Yukina interrupted him in an attempt to soothe him.

“Someone besides us has come to Itogami Island?”

“Yes,” readily admitted Koyomi.

“Yui Haba and Shio Hikawa were visiting Blue Elysium during their time off.”

“Blue Elysium...? I see... So they came to see Glenda...!” murmured Kojou, suppressing his irritation.

Since Yui was the first human being she’d met since awakening in the

present era, Glenda was extremely fond of her. He had no doubt Yuiri and Shio had come to the Demon Sanctuary to meet their dragon friend and had ended up getting entangled in the Electoral War.

“Then Miss Avrora would be with Yuiri and company, right?”

Yukina’s statement held an echo of relief. It was sad that Yuiri and Shio’s vacation had been ruined, but she and Kojou should have been grateful about gaining more allies they could count on.

For some reason, however, the black cat sitting on Koyomi Shizuka’s lap released a painfully leaden breath.

“That’s why I’ve called you here, Yukina Himeragi.”

Koyomi seemed to have set her mind on something as she quietly interjected.

“This morning, immediately after landing in Island East, the Second Primogenitor, Fallgazer, launched a surprise attack against Yuiri Haba.”

“The Second Primogenitor...?!”

Yukina widened her eyes in shock. Koyomi Shizuka did not wait for her shock to subside as she continued her words.

“At present, we have no idea where Yuiri Haba and the dragon girl are located. That leads us to conclude that they’ve been captured by Fallen Dynasty forces.”

“Just those two...?”

Kojou calmly double-checked. If Yuiri and Glenda were off the grid, he took that as meaning the other two girls were safe and sound. Nor did “Paper Noise” refute his assumption.

“Shio Hikawa and Avrora Florestina are currently fugitives in Island East. Although they are currently safe, it surely won’t be easy for them to escape the Fallen Dynasty’s envelopment with their power alone.”

“Got it. So if we go and save ’em now, it’s fine, right?”

Kojou suggested this in a flash. Yukina hastily countered him.

“No, senpai, you can’t.”

“Why not?!”

“First of all, calm down, Fourth Primogenitor boy. It is as Yukina says.”

Curled up on Koyomi Shizuka’s lap, the black cat admonished Kojou with a strong tone of voice.

“Even you, Professor Kitty...?! But why...?”

“Are you really going to fight the Second Primogenitor with your body in such a liminal state? Are you planning to have your Beast Vassals run amok in record time so you can kick off a fun little banquet for everyone?”

“Why you...!”

Kojou’s words caught in his throat as he ruefully clenched his fist.

Since all the primogenitors were on the same island, his Beast Vassals were on yellow alert. If he engaged the Second Primogenitor in actual combat on top of that, they’d probably go berserk immediately, just like Yukari had said. Even though Avrora had awakened and fallen into peril, Kojou was in no condition to go rescue her.

“It’s all right.”

As if to give courage to her anxious friend, Yukina spoke that declaration loud and clear.

“Himeragi?”

“I’ll go to Miss Avrora. Isn’t that right, Master?”

She locked her gaze on the black cat as she directed her question toward her. Yukari hesitated from what seemed like internal conflict for an instant before giving a painful nod.

“Hey, wait up. I can’t let Yukina go all by herself, even if I’m like thi...”

“No, it’s better if I go alone. That way, I’ll be able to infiltrate Island East without the Second Primogenitor noticing, and we won’t have to worry about you running amok.”

Yukina firmly rejected Kojou’s pessimism.

“If there’s anything to worry about, it’s whether you’ll lay a hand upon one of

the other girls while she leaves you behind.”

The black cat cracked irresponsible frivolities. “Oh, shaddap,” growled Kojou, twisting his lips.

“You need not be concerned for Yukina Himeragi, Fourth Primogenitor. As a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, my top priority is halting the large-scale sorcerous disaster known as the Blazing Banquet.”

Koyomi Shizuka spoke in a businesslike tone that made it difficult to read her emotions.

“But...!”

“Besides, have you perchance forgotten? She wields a Schneewaltzer, one of our secret weapons—a purifying spear that can destroy even a primogenitor.”

Kojou sighed deeply as one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency glared at him.

What Shizuka had just said was equivalent to ordering Yukina to destroy the Second Primogenitor should it prove necessary. Though exceedingly reckless, it was undeniable that no human being other than Yukina wielding Snowdrift Wolf could make it happen. She was the only one with a shot at saving Shio and Avrora.

“Got it... I’m counting on you, Himeragi.”

Kojou spoke with a tone tinged with chagrin.

“Yes. Leave it to me. Do you know Hikawa’s current location?”

Nodding enthusiastically, Yukina turned to face the black cat once more.

Thanks to the Electoral War, Yukina and company couldn’t use Shio’s smartphone GPS data. Plus, it would be difficult for Shio and Avrora to convey their whereabouts to everyone while on the lam.

The only other option was to use a remote viewing via ritual spell or a large number of *shikigami* to seek them out, but Yukina was ill versed in complex ritual spells. She was a close-range anti-demon combat specialist, a Sword Shaman, through and through.

“No need to worry about that. Once you arrive in Island East, a certain individual will serve as your guide.”

Koyomi Shizuka’s statement was rather evasive. It felt less like she was trying to cause drama and more like conveying the person’s name would make her blush. The information this individual had provided was probably what had allowed Yukari and Koyomi to grasp Shio’s location in the first place.

The next moment, Shizuka moved her wheelchair forward just a little, taking Yukina’s right hand as she stood still.

“...Lady Shizuka?” Yukina asked back in surprise. The wounded woman, head of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, continued to grasp Yukina’s hand, her eyes closed as if in prayer.

“Yukina Himeragi, please do not forget. Peer not into the future. Slice it open with thine own hands.”

“Y-yes.”

Flustered by the words of encouragement flooding toward her, Yukina nodded deeply, her expression tense. Finally, the woman pulled back from her hand, whereupon Yukina bowed to her.

“Himeragi.”

When Yukina moved to leave the patient room and head off to Shio and Avrora, Kojou called her to a halt without thinking.

The taut look on her profile had made him sense an unusual, disquieting aura about her.

“I am heading out, senpai... Sorry.”

Looking back, she awkwardly smiled before setting off into a sprint as if to flee the scene.

He watched as she left, feeling worried for no tangible reason.

3

“‘Sorry’ she says... What’s up with her?”

Back in Koyomi's room, Kojou tilted his head as he recalled Yukina's parting words. He wondered if leaving him behind to meet Aurora alone was weighing on her mind.

"That was cowardly of me, was it not? In the end, I pushed a crucial decision onto her."

Sitting in her wheelchair, Koyomi Shizuka murmured, seemingly to herself.

The black cat on her lap made a very human-looking shake of her head.

"Well, we can lament all we like, but there was no other choice. All we can do is to do our part."

"Isn't the Lion King Agency not allowed to interfere in the Electoral War or something?"

Kojou prompted back, suspicious as he recalled something Yukari had told him previously.

The Japanese government had adopted a stance of noninterference regarding Itogami Island's internal unrest. As a special government department, the Lion King Agency was thus unable to send fresh reinforcements to Itogami Island.

"I suppose not...provided the Electoral War is a conflict truly confined to Itogami Island's borders, that is."

Yukari spoke with a tone laden with implication.

"What do you mean?"

When Kojou pressed for more, the black cat simply replied with *"Let's see,"* narrowing her eyes as if smiling.

"We understand The Blood's objective quite well. Created as a Fourth Primogenitor prototype, he seeks to christen the Fourth Primogenitor as a symbol of fear—absurd as it may be, the logic tracks. And well, given their tedium, you can see why the other primogenitors got on board with this foolish scheme, yes?"

"Yeah."

"But what about the MAR corporation? They were one of the major financial

backers for the construction of Itogami Island. One wouldn't imagine they would go to all this trouble to start the Blazing Banquet since it would be such a disaster for them. Am I mistaken?"

"So...MAR and The Blood have different goals?"

Yukari's assertion shocked Kojou so much that he forgot to blink as he lapsed into thought.

"At this stage, it's mere supposition without any tangible basis. But don't you think it's worth looking into?"

The black cat made an amused sound with her throat. Koyomi Shizuka calmly picked up where Yukari left off.

"If the multinational conglomerate MAR is controlling the Electoral War from behind the scenes, they're clearly infringing upon Itogami Island's autonomy as recognized by the government of Japan. This serves as an ample basis for the Lion King Agency, an anti-sorcerous terrorism organization, to act."

"That's how it is. Just don't expect too much of us."

The black cat on Koyomi's lap closed her eyes. When next they opened, Yukari's familiar had returned to an ordinary feline. Yukari had severed her connection with the animal.

Then, perhaps freed from tension by Yukari's parting, Koyomi Shizuka suddenly went limp and slumped forward.

"You all right...? Maybe I should call someone over..."

Kojou rushed over to lend her a hand.

At present, Koyomi Shizuka was gravely wounded and required absolute rest. Despite that, she'd still forced herself to meet him and Yukina to convey the information about Avrora.

"I am sorry. I shall sleep awhile."

At this, Koyomi Shizuka closed her eyes, still seated in her wheelchair.

The nurse call rang, and multiple staff members hurried into the patient room.

“Please don’t forget this, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Koyomi Shizuka frailly called to him as he tried to leave out of consideration for her.

“I gave Yukina the order. Therefore, please...”

Unable to continue her statement until the very end, she fell asleep, depleted of strength.

The nurses sent him away, and Kojou stood, still bewildered, in the dimly lit corridor and sighed.

Apparently, the date had changed over without him realizing it. In short order, it would be twenty-four hours since he and the others had returned to Itogami Island. The Electoral War would commence on the morning of its fifth day.

Though the Electoral War dragging out grated on his nerves, there was nothing he could do about it now.

Frustrated, he stormed down the corridor before he saw Kanon running over from the waiting room. For once, the unflaggingly calm girl betrayed a hint of nervousness on her face.

“Kaname?”

“Akatsuki! Um, have you seen Shizuri?”

Clutching Nina against her chest, Kanon asked this as if clinging to his every word.

“Nah, I haven’t seen her... What’s up with Cas?”

When he answered, Kanon bit her lip for a moment, as though hesitating.

“She’s gone.”

“Gone?”

Knitting his brows, he looked back at the corridor.

Now that she mentioned it, the lab interior was oddly quiet. He would have expected Shizuri to ask him about this and that straightaway after waiting for their meeting to finish.

“Don’t tell me she went off after Yukina?”

Kojou pontificated with a frown. In one sense, not allowing Yukina to head into the Second Primogenitor’s domain all by herself—tagging along whether she liked it or not—was a very Cas-like thing to do.

“I don’t know...but the fact she asked about the route to Keystone Gate before she vanished has me somewhat concerned.”

“Keystone Gate...?”

He tried to wrap his head around Kanon’s unexpected eyewitness testimony.

Shizuri had only just moved to Itogami Island, so she had a poor lay of the land. It made sense for her to ask for directions to the Keystone Gate. The problem was, why would she be interested in that now of all times?

“Anything else? Did she mention anything other than that?”

“Other than...that...ah...!”

Kanon gave an audible *gasp*. Perhaps she’d realized something. She looked at Nina, who was sitting in her arms.

Indeed, went Nina, nodding back to her.

“She said something like, ‘There can’t be a banquet if the Electoral War ends tonight!’”

“Hmph,” added Nina, turning her breasts away as she declared this in a haughty tone. Apparently, she was trying to imitate Shizuri. Surprisingly, she wasn’t half bad at it.

“Why the hell does she know about the banquet?”

Blood drained from Kojou’s entire body. If Shizuri knew he might trigger the Blazing Banquet, she would absolutely try to stop it, even if she had to get reckless.

“Wait, don’t tell me she overheard me talking with Ki Juranbarada...and then...!”

Maybe, just like Yukina rushing out when she’d noticed Kojou’s Beast Vassals running amok, Shizuri had rushed out of the lab next, only to eavesdrop on

Kojou and Ki's conversation.

But she'd hidden that from both him and Yukina.

And if Shizuri of all people was pretending not to know something, her goal was probably to— “Akatsuki...?”

He went blue in the face. Kanon directed a look of concern at him.

Giving into his nerves, Kojou slammed his fist against a wall.

“I've gotta stop Cas... She's planning to take out The Blood all by herself!”

“Mm...how rash of her.”

That even got Nina down. Kanon was speechless.

Kojou exhaled shakily.

“Nina, take care of Kanase and Astarte for me. I'm sorry.”

“Where are you planning on running off to?”

“I'm gonna bring back Cas!”

With that, Kojou set off with long strides.

Now that he thought about it, learning Shizuri was heading for Keystone Gate had been a stroke of good fortune. With his vampiric physical abilities at full tilt, he might still be able to bring her back before she got there.

The problem was how long his Beast Vassals would play nice.

“When your body's running wild?”

As if she'd read his thoughts, Nina called out to him from behind. Kanon, too, was chasing after him in a little run as he headed outside the lab.

“I've gotta bring her back! I don't have a choice!”

Kojou retorted dismissively, turning back to them. Nina, however, calmly received his rebuttal.

“Indeed. But setting that aside, there's something odd flying this way.”

With that, she gazed upward, feigning ignorance.

“...Huh?”

This caused Kojou to lift his head as well.

The predawn night sky peered through the hole in the ceiling that Kojou had created while fighting the day before. It was gray, with nary a trace of starlight remaining.

An ear-piercing noise like the buzzing of bees blared from overhead. They were hearing the exhaust sounds from aviation turboshaft engines.

“The heck? Helicopters...?”

An ominous feeling came over Kojou as he narrowed his eyes at the sight of the aircraft flying through Itogami Island’s sky.

There were five helicopters in total. They all belonged to MAR, just like the one Kojou and Kanon had encountered the previous morning.

Oddly, they were engaging in tight turns and rapid descents, as though they were jostling with one another. From time to time, dazzling sparks showed in the vicinity of their torsos—muzzle flashes from machine-gun barrels.

“MAR choppers doing air-to-air combat against one another?”

The unexpected sight grabbed Kojou’s attention.

More accurately, it wasn’t so much air-to-air combat as a one-sided pursuit. One craft seemed to be fleeing from the others as the four chased after it, unleashing a hail of bullets.

The helicopter being chased was firing back, but the difference in firepower was overwhelming. And unlike its pursuers, the craft being chased was out of ammo.

At this rate, it’ll get pummeled to oblivion. The instant that morose thought entered Kojou’s head, the craft on the run unleashed a single silver light. With a roar, the radiance drew a giant magic circle in midair.

Then the magic circle generated a miasma—a cursed mist that destroyed electronic devices and threw people into chaos. Kojou knew the nature of this attack.

“That magic circle...?! Kirasaka?!”

He made out a girl wielding a silver bow inside the helicopter on the run. The MAR helicopter unit was after Sayaka Kirasaka, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

“Nina!”

“Indeed. Close your eyes for a moment, Kanon.”

From Kanon’s arms, Nina seemed to instantly pick up on what he’d been thinking.

Two of the aircraft enveloped by Sayaka’s ritual spell artillery attack pulled away, abandoning the chase. However, the other two stubbornly continued their pursuit of Sayaka’s vehicle.

Nina pointed a finger gun toward the enemy helicopter.

After carefully taking aim, she instantly released an incredible torrent of light from her fingertip.

She’d fired a heavy metallic particle gun employing alchemy—a charged particle-beam cannon attack.

The shell of charged particles rocketed at sublight speeds to blast through one of the helicopters, causing it to decelerate. Nina followed up with a second beam attack and gunned the remaining vehicle down.

“Wasn’t that a little overkill just now...?”

Kojou asked Nina reproachfully, gazing at the helicopters bursting in flames as they lost altitude.

“Do not be concerned. I shot through the power unit only. Even if their generators halt, I’ve heard that something called *autorotation* shall allow them to land safely.”

“You know that much about ’em, huh?”

“I saw it on an overseas drama on cable TV.”

“...Well, fine.”

For a second there, he’d been in danger of respecting Nina for exhibiting a surprising amount of knowledge; he rectified that as he murmured and

shrugged. Whatever the case, the fact remained that she'd succeeded in driving off the pursuing helicopters.

"Kirasaka and whoever should be safe for the time being, right?"

Kojou looked up at the helicopter Sayaka was aboard as he sighed with relief.

"Aa..."

Just then, Kanon shouted in surprise.

Black smoke suddenly spewed from the helicopter Sayaka was aboard, whereupon it seemed to lose speed, swaying as it lowered its altitude. Riddled by the pursuers' ferocious attacks, her craft had already been driven past its limits.

The aircraft left an almost comedic *bang* behind as it vanished from their sights.

"Huh. It crashed."

Nina murmured indifferently.

4

Slipping through the tangled levels of Island North's subterranean district, they caught sight of Keystone Gate. Like a giant wedge thrust into the ground, it had been constructed as an inverted pyramid. This literal keystone connected four gigafloats: east, west, south, and north. That was the true nature of the odd structure.

At twelve stories high, it was Itogami Island's tallest structure. The facility served as a mixed corporate and private space and held local government offices, hotels, retail stores, restaurants, *etc.*

An enormous crack ran along the exterior of this futuristic structure, almost as if someone had split it with an invisible ax.

When the curtain had first lifted to herald the Electoral War, The Blood had used his sword Beast Vassal to wreak this destruction so as to bolster his claim of being the true Fourth Primogenitor. Since then, the Keystone Gate had

become his personal castle. In other words, it was likely The Blood was still there.

“Ah, there it is, Shizurin. Heeeey, Shizurin!”

A small-statured girl with pointy bestial ears stood before the bridge leading to Keystone Gate. Her chestnut curls swayed as she warmly waved a hand toward Shizuri.

Beside her stood a teenage boy with a graceful face that practically shouted “honors student.” An assault rifle stock was poking out of the fishing rod case he carried on his back.

“Yuno, Rui, thanks for coming. I’m sorry for making such an unreasonable request.”

Shizuri bowed her head to Yuno Amase and Rui Miyazumi—her old teammates from the Kasugaya Team from Attack Mage High back at Onrai Island.

Naturally, she didn’t think she could charge into Keystone Gate and defeat The Blood all by herself. But she also couldn’t come up with anyone fond enough of trouble to go along with her on such a reckless operation—none, save for her most dependable friends.

“If Squad Leader orders it, a degree of unreasonable suits us just fine.”

Rui began preparing his weapons as he replied. The fur of Yuno’s fluffy ears swayed as she donned her gauntlets.

“You wanna send The Blood packing six ways from Sunday and end the Electoral War for Kojikoji, right?”

“Er, well, um...that’s the long and short of it...”

Yuno’s shockingly easygoing attitude about this left Shizuri bewildered. Her friend was speaking in the same lighthearted tone she used when out shopping at the local convenience store.

“Even if we can’t defeat The Blood, we should be able to bring the Electoral War to a close if we can take over the Gigafloat Management Corporation computer room they’re occupying.”

Rui made this comment as he looked up at Keystone Gate, far quieter than it used to be.

Up close, the inverted pyramid structure was much larger than Shizuri had expected it to be. The structure was both an independent gigafloat of its own and the control device that managed the entirety of Itogami Island.

The concentrated artificial isle administration facility stretched some forty strata under the surface of the sea and was equipped with five supercomputers dubbed the Five Elements, which controlled all of the Island's infrastructure as well as the demon registration bracelets. The Order of the End had been able to kick off the Electoral War because it had them under its control.

In other words, they could bring the conflict to an end simply by taking back the Five Elements.

"The problem is, why has everyone left Keystone Gate alone when they also know that, right?"

Picking up where Rui's words left off, Yuno, their designated recon girl, said this conspicuously to herself as she charged toward the structure. Shizuri followed after her, with Rui taking up the rear. They'd used this formation countless times back at Attack Mage High.

Infiltrating the Keystone Gate was a simple affair since its shutters had been destroyed in the battle between the Order of the End and the Island Guard.

However, their vanguard, Yuno, came to a halt after barely a few strides into the edifice.

They were in a broad entrance hall, which led to a shopping mall lined with high-end boutiques.

But instead of the aroma of perfume, what hit their noses was the dense scent of blood.

The walls and the floor were pockmarked with countless bullet holes, and remains of polycarbonate shields and robot tanks were strewn all over, telltale signs of a clash between the Order of the End and the ruler candidates who'd invaded the Keystone Gate. Naturally, there were no corpses to be found, but the place reeked of death regardless.

“I guess some people didn’t leave it alone after all. They took their shots at taking the place. But the Order of the End sent them packing—every last one.”

Rui spoke in a sober tone of voice.

Biting her lip, Shizuri gripped the hilt of her long sword.

The ruler candidates had invaded with enough forces to do all this damage, and the Order of the End had repelled them anyway. At that moment, she realized just how reckless it was for the three of them to try and defeat The Blood on their own. Then— “Shizurin, get down!”

Yuno, who’d been on lookout, suddenly turned back and shouted this at Shizuri.

“Eh...?!”

Yuno hadn’t intended to throw her friend for a loop, but Shizuri was shaken enough that her concentration had lapsed. Since she couldn’t respond immediately, Rui practically tossed her aside to get her behind cover.

The next moment, countless bullets riddled the spot where she’d been standing.

It was AI-controlled machine-gun fire. Military security pods all over the interior of the shopping mall poked their heads out to and fro. Dispatching the ruler candidates must have been their doing.

“What in the world?! What’s the Order of the End doing with modern weaponry?!”

“I see. Now things are a little clearer.”

Evading gunfire himself, Rui let slip a giggle.

“What, what? What’s clear?”

Still flat on the ground, Yuno seemed amused as she posed the question.

“The mastermind behind this incident. Looks like MAR is lying about being neutral.”

“Mm? MAR’s the mastermind behind this?”

“Those military security pods are brand-new MAR products. They probably

haven't even hit global arms marketplaces yet."

"Ahaaa—"

I see, went Yuno, nodding with deep appreciation. It was obviously impossible for anyone other than MAR, the manufacturer, to send a product into actual combat before it had gone up for sale. This proved that they were actively involved occupying Keystone Gate, rather than merely cooperating in the management of the Electoral War.

"So, all the food we've been so grateful for has come directly from the masterminds?!"

Shizuri violently punched the wreckage of a tank, forgetting that she was using it in the stead of a shield.

Beside herself, Yuno smiled painfully.

"Shizurin, you just loved that MAR instant ramen, didn't you?"

"H-how could you not?! They had cream cheese toppings no other brand had, which went together really well with the wasabi mayo... Of course they were delicious!"

"O-oh really..."

"At any rate, nothing will be solved by hiding here. The more time that passes, the greater our disadvantage grows!"

"I suppose so. Let's do the usual, then?"

Seeing that Shizuri had finally recovered from inner turmoil, Rui calmly made a proposal.

From just that, the three of them understood their roles. Even if their experiences had been virtual, they were a veteran team that had overcome harsh live combat scenarios time and time again. There were no communication concerns here.

"Let's goooo!"

Yuno kicked off the ground and shot into the air in an overwhelming leap that made full use of her beast-person explosiveness. The security pods' targeting

couldn't keep up with that level of verticality.

Toyed with by Yuno's movements, their foes' attacks became sporadic.

Threading through that momentary needle, Rui hurled a ritual spell grenade. Light and miasma scattered about to bring the machines to a halt. And then: "—Hauras!"

Leaping out from behind the wreckage, Shizuri lashed out with her crimson long sword. She unleashed her demonic energy to infuse the blade all at once, channeling her power into a single, hulking blade of pure havoc.

The torrent of explosive demonic energy raced through the shopping mall passage and instantly pulverized a dozen security pods. Since she didn't need to hold back against machines, she could be as savage as possible. Her huge burst of energy also engulfed a high-end boutique and left it in tatters, but she pretended she hadn't seen that.

"And that's that."

Sheathing her long sword in its scabbard, Shizuri lifted her chin with pride.

Rui and Yuno didn't even glance her way as they gazed at the remains of the security pods.

"...It's strange."

"What is?"

Rui's curt statement puzzled Shizuri.

"There's no sign of enemy reinforcements coming. I don't think you could keep Keystone Gate occupied with numbers like these."

"Can't you chalk it up to MAR being stingy with expenses?"

"Wouldn't that be nice."

Rui smiled gently, vaguely brushing off her friend. Shizuri sullenly pursed her lips.

"At the very least, the Order of the End is most definitely running dry on numbers. Ms. Minamiya told me that sealing of the Prison Barrier renders them unable to summon more of their comrades."

“If the Witch of the Void said that, it’s probably true, huh? You’d think that’d make them concentrate what they do have here even more but...”

Hmm, went Rui, touching a hand to his chin as he sank into thought.

Suddenly, his expression stiffened. Shizuri drew her blade and went on guard once more.

A strange sound echoed through the entirety of the hall. An odd vibration was shaking the structure.

“Shizurin!”

Yuno warned in a sharp voice.

The floor at Shizuri’s feet tore open at almost the exact same time.

Emerging from the split and smashed concrete floor was a grotesque shape reminiscent of a great serpent. Reaching some seven to eight meters in length, the long and thin creature assaulted her with a precise, whiplike snap.

“Why you!”

She intercepted the bizarrely precise incoming assault with her long sword.

The creature that resembled a huge serpent was actually a tentacle covered with translucent, viscous liquid.

Her undulating blade glowed crimson as she cleanly severed the tentacle in half. It continued writhing fiercely on the ground after it fell to the floor.

“Wh-what in the world...is this...?!”

Her face twitching in shock, she slowly backed away.

Shizuri’s Hauras was a demonic blade that increased its own might by stealing demonic energy from the opponents it slashed. Her sword reacting like this meant that this was no ordinary creature but a beast infused with demonic energy of its own.

“Hey...doesn’t this tentacle feel kinda familiar?”

It was Yuno who noticed this, grimacing with disgust.

“It couldn’t be...!”

Shizuri made a low groan.

That next instant, giant demon beasts exploded out from the rubble near the root of the tentacle.

The creatures were particularly fiendish in appearance; they were like a cross between a ferocious reptile and a carnivorous insect. They had thick, armor-like hides and countless tentacles. Amid the darkness gleamed six sets of eyes—Shizuri knew these monsters well.

“Why are Unknowns wandering around the interior of Keystone Gate—?!”

Her shriek echoed through the dark building’s interior.

But the sound of falling rubble erased her voice. None answered her question.

5

The tallest strata of Island North—

Sayaka Kirasaka gazed at the sea before daybreak from the branches of a roadside tree standing along an ocean cliff. But she was staring at it...upside down.

Her parachute had snagged in the branches of the tree, leaving her suspended in midair, swaying slowly as if she were a pendulum. Just before the helicopter she’d been on crashed, her co-occupants had basically shoved her out, whereupon she’d floated down via parachute, somehow reaching land in the process.



“Uu...no one told me I’d have to do parachute drops two days in a row...”

Mumbling that with a haggard expression, Sayaka undid the harness of her parachute. There wasn’t even a two-meter distance to the ground, so she wouldn’t have to use a physical-reinforcement ritual spell to drop down.

The instant she righted herself and loosened her shoulder belts, however, she lost her balance and became immobilized at an unexpected angle. Hand bound behind her head, she was now hanging upside down from a branch by her left leg—she looked like a pathetic rabbit caught in a snare.

“...Wait, no way...?! My leg’s caught in the cord, and I can’t pull it loose! What in the world is this?!”

Sayaka desperately wriggled to escape her inverted, suspended state, but in the end, all she managed to do was to make the parachute cords constrict even tighter.

When she’d lost her balance, the instrument case with her long sword inside had plummeted to the ground. And since both her hands were ensnared, she couldn’t use any spell tablets to summon a *shikigami*.

A youthful, eye-catching girl in self-bondage was hanging upside down on a roadside before dawn—if anyone saw her, they’d definitely suspect she had some kind of weird fetish.

What should I do? she wondered, at a total loss before she heard the footsteps of someone approaching.

“Kirasaka, are you all right?!”

“K-Kojou Akatsuki...?”

She swiveled her head around at his familiar voice.

Running over with his breath a little short and, for some reason, his hair dyed blond, was Kojou Akatsuki. It was difficult to say that the hair, resembling that of some delinquent punk from the far reaches of civilization, suited him, but now really wasn’t the time or place to bring that up.

He must have spotted her during the crash and came after her.

“Thank goodness! Save me, Kojou Akatsuki... Ah, wait, don’t! No don’t come! Don’t look!”

Remembering her current predicament, Sayaka panicked.

After all, the pull of gravity had flipped up her skirt to completely expose her butt and thighs. Her abdomen was almost entirely on display up to her belly button. She flailed around her right leg, her one free limb, in an attempt to at least conceal her panties somehow, but it was all for naught.

“Which is it...? Anyway, is it really all right to thrash around in a place like that...?”

“Huh?!”

His rather realistic take abruptly brought her back to reality.

Just then, Sayaka heard a *craaaack* from above. The branch of the roadside tree supporting her had broken.

“A-aaaaaaah!!”

Struck with the sensation of being suspended in midair, Sayaka let out a fervent scream. Her limbs were bound, so she would have no way to break her fall.

“Whoa there?!”

As Sayaka shut her eyes in preparation for impact, Kojou caught her from right underneath the tree. The force of her fall proved too much for him, however, so they both wound up tumbling onto the ground in a tangle.

Sayaka, who’d ended up nearly pressing her nether regions against his face, hastily leaped back and pushed down her skirt.

“Ow, ow, ow...wait...!! D-did you see?!”

“Er...well, yeah. But that’s not really what matters at the moment, right?”

Rubbing where he’d bumped his head on the ground, Kojou sat up and sighed.

Sayaka reddened as her eyes filled with tears.

“S-something that sensitive...?! Not important?!”

“Just explain yourself already. What were you doing falling out of the sky...?”

“I’ll have you know I wasn’t falling from the sky because I wanted to...ah!”

Sayaka paled as she swiftly lifted her head. She shifted her gaze toward the sea once more.

“Mother?! Mother and that man are...?!”

“...Mother?”

He turned back to the panicked girl, his expression like that of someone hoisting up a fox. He wondered if her mother had come to visit Itogami Island or something.

“Your parents! They were on that transport craft earlier!”

“With Kirasaka? How the hell did things wind up like that...?”

“That would end up a fairly long explanation but...”

Sayaka hemmed and hawed. Perhaps the fact of the matter was that she didn’t exactly understand how this situation had come about herself.

What Kojou had vaguely picked up along the way was that his mother had defied MAR when she’d ensured Avrora’s escape from the Demon Beast Park on Blue Elysium.

He didn’t know where Mimori Akatsuki had gone since. But if MAR had captured her, and Sayaka had subsequently rescued her, that would explain why those helicopters were after them.

That aside, the question still remained as to exactly who was piloting the aircraft they’d been on. *And what’s up with how wishy-washy she’s being?* pondered Kojou when, suddenly, a mix of voice and static coursed out from Sayaka’s back.

“...Hey, Sayaka, you hearin’ this?”

“Gajou Akatsuki?! You’re all right?!”

Plucking off a transceiver attached to the parachute harness, Sayaka snarled back as though she were biting him.

Kojou frowned at hearing his father’s name on her lips.

It certainly wouldn't have surprised him if his dad of all people could fly a chopper, and he had the motivation to rescue Mimori. Why Gajou and Sayaka had been together was definitely a mystery, but she didn't seem to have much of a handle on that part, either.

"Somehow...we crash-landed on the water, so it's gonna take a little while to get back to Itogami Island, but hey, unless sharks come out, we should be just fine."

"I'm so hungry—I wanna eat ice cream—"

He heard Gajou's and Mimori's carefree voices against the sound of waves in the background. Their helicopter had fallen into the sea, but they seemed safe for the moment at least.

An expression of relief came over Sayaka as she confirmed this. And then...

"How dare you shove me out the door like that...!"

"Hey, I put a parachute on you, didn't I?"

Sayaka lashed out at him resentfully, only for Gajou to respond as though he'd done her a favor.

"That's not the point?! How could you treat me like that after twisting my arm into helping you rescue Mother?!"

"Anyway, it seems like we're all safe for the time being. That's all. If you see my idiot son, tell him I said hi... Whoa, oh crap, we're sinking!"

"Ice cr—..."

Static drowned out their voices until they finally cut out entirely. Tossing away the completely silent transceiver, Sayaka hung her head.

"Hah...really, what in the world...?"

"Ahhh...yeah. I get the gist of it. You've had it rough, too, huh?"

"I most certainly have..."

When Kojou turned a gaze of pity toward her, Sayaka looked back with a bundle of conflicting emotions on her face.

Then, as if abruptly realizing something, she widened her eyes and looked all

around.

“Come to think of it, where’s Yukina? She’s not with you?”

“She’s in the Second Primogenitor’s domain right now. She went to save Shio and stuff.”

“To save Shio Hikawa...?! You’re saying she went to meet Avrora Florestina?!”

Her eyes widened as she closed the distance with him. Her sheer aggression threw him off.

“Yeah, that’s right... You sure figured that out fast, huh?”

“Why didn’t you stop her?!”

“Stop her? Professor Kitty’s the one who sent her, you know?”

“That’s the problem!!”

Sayaka grabbed hold of Kojou’s collar, violently shaking him to-and-fro. Her lips twitched and trembled, and she looked as though she’d been backed against a wall.

“Master is going to have Yukina kill Avrora Florestina!!”

“...Huh? Kill her... Why would she...?”

Kojou stared back at her, bewildered. The leap was so huge that he couldn’t keep up with it.

Suddenly, Yukina’s parting words came to mind.

“I am sorry,” she had told him.

“No way...to stop the Blazing Banquet...?”

All warmth vanished from Kojou’s voice.

If Avrora’s body, the very seal itself, were to vanish, the twelfth Beast Vassal slumbering within her would be freed. Then the freed Beast Vassal would go to join Kojou, its proper host and master. After all, the twelfth Beast Vassal, Alrescha Glacies, had been torn away from the Fourth Primogenitor.

With the twelfth Beast Vassal incorporated into him, Kojou would become a complete Fourth Primogenitor, and the Blazing Banquet would be averted. That

was Yukina's mission. She was heading to eliminate Avrora in order to put an end to the banquet.

That was why Koyomi Shizuka had given Yukina that order in front of him.

So that Kojou would know the Lion King Agency had decided to take out Avrora. So that he would know Yukina bore no responsibility. So that he wouldn't hate her for it.

"Are you aware? Of what's happening inside your own body...?"

Sayaka turned to him in surprise. He nodded sadly.

"Did Mom...? Did my mother seriously spring Avrora in order to stop this? To make me consume her...?!"

"Consume? You, consume Avrora Florestina...?"

Sayaka blinked, eyes wide open as she stared at him.

Kojou couldn't hide his bewilderment at her unexpected reaction.

"It's not that? This is what Ki Juranbarada told me. Wipe out Avrora or watch Itogami Island get destroyed in the inevitable banquet—make your choice."

"And Yukina and the others bought it, huh..."

Sayaka gnawed on a fingernail, murmuring.

"You're saying he was lying through his teeth?"

"No, it's not a lie. But it's not the whole truth, either. There's one other way to stop the Blazing Banquet."

"Huh...?"

He grasped both her shoulders and pulled her close. He was staring straight into her eyes; her cheeks reddened.

"Do Shio and the others know that?"

"I—I don't think they know. Your mother said she'd kept it a secret, see."

"Why would she do that?!"

"She had her reasons. If they'd known, Shio Hikawa and company would have probably hesitated to bring Avrora to the island. That's why."

Faltering, Sayaka tried to stand up for her mother. Kojou frowned slightly.

“It’s that bad a way?”

“Anyway, we need to catch up to Yukina.”

Finally recovering from her inner turmoil, Sayaka straightened up, her expression taut.

“Yukina’s headed to Island East, then?”

“Yeah. But are you okay with this, Kirasaka? Isn’t this going against the Lion King Agency’s ord—”

“I don’t know what’s right or wrong here, either!”

Sayaka shouted frailly, as if reassuring herself more than him.

Even if the Lion King Agency had put her up to it, Yukina would surely agonize over killing Aurora, a completely innocent girl. Sayaka couldn’t sanction that.

“Anyway, I hate Yukina being unhappy more than anything! If it’s going to be like that, I’d rather depend on someone like you...!”

“Depend on...me?”

What does she mean? thought Kojou, slack-jawed.

But his statement was drowned out by an incredible roar that came from out of the blue.

It was an unpleasant, high-pitched wave of noise, like a howl from a giant speaker placed right next to your ear. The resonance caused windows to shatter around Itogami Island.

“What’s that sound?!”

“It’s coming from the direction of the Keystone Gate...!”

Covering their ears, they shifted their gaze to the structure. An unforeseen circumstance had arisen right where Shizuri was heading.

“Cas’s work? But this sound... That’s the Unknowns’ resonant destruction?!”

“Unknowns...?!”

Kojou’s utterance made Sayaka’s expression frost over.

Of course, she also knew about the Unknowns that had appeared on Itogami Island not so long ago. Their vile nature, absorbing demonic energy to evolve at a tumultuous pace, had become the subject of fierce debate among demon beast researchers across the globe.

In truth, the Unknowns were artificial life-forms that researchers at MAR had created. The giant conglomerate was the link between the monsters and the Electoral War.

“Cas...!”

He waved a clenched fist, glaring at the Keystone Gate all the while.

Yukina was heading to the Second Primogenitor’s domain to kill Avrora. And on top of that, there was no doubt in his mind that Shizuri was falling into peril that very moment— Asking himself which one to go after, Kojou froze, unable to find an answer.

As he did, the roar of resonant destruction echoed once more, violently shaking Itogami Island.

And yet, all Kojou did was stand in bewilderment.

6

The roar reached Island East as well.

“Uu...a crazed noise that invites ruin...!”

Hiding herself in the corner of an abandoned warehouse, Avrora covered her ears and made a tearful grimace.

Shio, too, plugged her ears while peering at Keystone Gate through a warehouse window.

The enormous inverted pyramid-style structure sat there quietly, like a giant tombstone. But there was no mistaking that something was going on inside.

“That sound... I know that sound.”

A grave look crossed Shio’s face.

It was the vibration from the resonant destruction employed as an embedded weapon by the creatures known as Unknown IX-4—creatures Shio and Yuri had encountered on a prior visit to Itogami Island.

“Why did Unknowns appear at Keystone Gate?!”

“...Come to think of it, the puppeteers behind the last Unknowns—behind the Gaminodon Incident—were engineers working for an MAR subsidiary, right?”

Motoki Yaze twisted his lips into a sarcastic smile.

Unknown IX-4 had been provisionally dubbed “Gaminodon.” Its full scientific name was Proitogaminodon Magus Nipponix.

There was no guarantee the demon beast that had appeared at Keystone Gate was a Gaminodon, but considering the situation, he figured it was highly likely this was a closely related variant.

“MAR...?!”

Shio looked back at Yaze in surprise.

Up to that point, MAR had acted as a neutral third party, rescuing the injured and paying for damages incurred during the Electoral War. It also managed the provision of food and goods, so many citizens of Itogami City must have felt a debt of gratitude to it. But if that same corporation was participating in the occupation of Keystone Gate, the premise would be turned on its head.

“It’s not so strange, is it? On the surface they might be giving humanitarian aid, but we knew from the start they were in cahoots with the Order of the End.”

“...Who’s fighting the Unknowns?”

Shio asked this with a tone of disgust.

“Who knows... It’d be great if Kojou didn’t get caught up in it, though.”

Yaze casually shrugged. At this, Aurora lifted her face in fright.

“Kojou...!”

“Ahhh, sorry. I’m sure he’s all right.”

Yaze swiftly amended his statement.

Shio giggled as she watched him. Motoki Yaze acted like a sarcastic, detached observer, but apparently, he still didn't want to worry pure and innocent Aurora.

"Hang tight a little longer, okay? Breaking through the Second Primogenitor's perimeter is still a no-go right now."

Crouching to put himself eye to eye with her, Yaze smiled as if conflicted.

Shio listened in on them, suspicious. Despite his flaky tone of voice, she sensed an odd degree of certainty behind his shaky demeanor. It seemed like he had some kind of plan to get Aurora out of there.

"Will things really change if we stay put?"

Shio glared at Yaze as she posed the question. He gave her a little grin to try and placate her.

"Li'l Himeragi's coming this way. She's crossing the canal right now."

"Yukina Himeragi is...?"

Shio blinked hard.

Yukina and her Schneewaltzer were without a doubt the most reliable reinforcements one could depend on in this situation. After all, the Sword Shaman had been dispatched to the island *to destroy a primogenitor* if necessary.

Yaze, however, couldn't have had phone or Internet access while he was inside the Second Primogenitor's domain. Yet he'd still been able to convey his own whereabouts to Yukina. Shio didn't have the foggiest idea how.

"...That's it; take a left at the next intersection. After that, you'll see an overpass; go under that, 'kay? There's an abandoned warehouse past that, B Wing Number Two..."

Yaze donned his over-the-ear headphones, murmuring to himself from time to time. Shio, however, did not feel any ritual energy rising from his body. This only confused her more and more.

"Who are you, Motoki Yaze? Even if you're really involved with the Gigafloat Management Corporation, how are you in touch with Yukina Himeragi?"

“That answer gets into privacy territory, so can you please let it slide? Well, it’s a bunch of things.”

“What kind of reply is that...?! Can I really trust that Yukina Himeragi is coming?”

Shio was irritated as she chewed over Yaze’s reply, a little too conveniently vague.

Yaze made a pained smile as he shook his head, shifting his gaze beyond the window.

“She’s here. That’s a Sword Shaman for the Lion King Agency for you. Damn fast.”

“Eh...?”

Shio instantly moved to shield Aurora as she peered outside.

She made out the sight of a girl gripping a silver spear floating in midair against the predawn sky for a brief moment.

Leaping from rooftop to rooftop, she was beelining via the shortest possible route. She was like a supple, ferocious feline beast.

Finally, she landed noiselessly in front of the warehouse where Shio and the others were.

As if someone’s voice was guiding her there, she confidently strode over to Shio and the others.

“Yukina Himeragi! You really came!”

Shio poked out her head from the wall she’d been hiding behind and waved at her.

Yukina smiled slightly, acknowledging Shio through that action. It was a very sad smile.

The silver spear she gripped made a heavy, metallic sound as it changed form. The metal shaft slid to its full length, and the sheathed secondary blades deployed left and right. It was shifting to combat mode.

“...Yukina...Himeragi...?”

Watching Yukina as she slowly approached, Shio narrowed her eyes in alarm.

“Are you alone? Is Kojou Akatsuki all right? How did you know we were here?”

“Hikawa, wait a sec. Something’s not right with her.”

When Shio moved toward Yukina, Yaze grasped her shoulder from behind to stop her. The thin smile had disappeared from his lips, replaced by a sharpness in his eyes.

“Hikawa, I’m sorry. Please hand Miss Avrora over to me.”

Halted, Yukina glanced at Avrora behind Shio’s back. Shio shuddered from the chill she felt from Yukina’s gaze, frigid and betraying no emotion whatsoever.

“Miss Avrora... No, the twelfth Kaleid Blood...you can hear me, yes?”

When Yukina calmly spoke to her, Avrora’s shoulders twitched and trembled.

Her voice had conveyed neither hostility nor anger—only clear lethal intent.

“Please come with me if you wish to save Kojou Akatsuki.”

Yukina quietly continued speaking.

Her face was rather lovely, which made her visible lack of emotion all the more frightening. It was enough to make one think she resembled something other than a human—a beautiful weapon, perhaps.

As if trying to flee from that fright, Shio slammed her perplexed thoughts into Yaze.

“What is the meaning of this, Motoki Yaze?! Is Himeragi being controlled by someone?!”

“Nah, that ain’t possible. The one who sent her here is Koyomi Shizuka, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency.”

Yaze was half-miffed as he made that retort. He didn’t know why Yukina would be after Avrora, either.

“Lady Shizuka’s order...?”

Shio murmured in a daze. She’d just realized that it was possible the Lion King

Agency had ordered Yukina to kill Avrora. If Koyomi Shizuka had commanded the assassination, then Yukina was blameless.

Yukina, however, shook her head as if to refute Shio's doubts.

"You're mistaken, Hikawa. I have come of my own will."

"Please explain this, Yukina Himeragi."

Shio dropped the instrument case on her back.

Her Freikugel Plus was an area-suppression weapon. It was useless in close combat. It would be better not to be weighed down just in case things with Yukina came down to a fight.

Even as she realized the other girl had made that judgment, Yukina's expression did not falter.

"I'll do that after as much as you like. So please, step aside."

"No. I won't."

Shio quietly steadied her breathing as she spoke. During the time they'd spent hiding in the warehouse, she'd recovered a fair bit of spiritual energy. She certainly couldn't say she was in tip-top shape, but it was plenty to take on Yukina alone.

Besides, her pride as Yukina's senior in the Lion King Agency was on the line.

"Motoki Yaze, take Avrora and run! Reverberate!"

Shio activated all the spell tablets she'd distributed throughout the warehouse beforehand. *Shikigami* taking the form of birds of prey bore down on her opponent from all directions.

"Snowdrift Wolf!"

Yukina twirled with her silver spear. Her magical energy—nullifying lance was the mortal enemy of all *shikigami*. The barest touch sliced the familiars apart like they were nothing and reverted them back to spell tablets once more.

But Shio had expected as much.

"Morning Star/Saikyou!"

Sliding into Yukina's blind spot while the *shikigami* drew her attention, Shio launched a kick in tandem with a physical-enhancement spell. She was using the art of the Eight Divine Generals—the Lion King Agency's silent assassination martial art. This was the Shamanic War Dancers' trump card; its details were even hidden from the Sword Shamans in their own organization.

But Yukina made no effort to evade Shio's attack.

“—Flaming Thunder!”

“Wha...?!”

An explosive shock wave pounded Shio like an invisible hammer. Yukina had shot the pulse out in all directions like bullets after gathering the high-purity spiritual energy within her.

Only Yukina's ridiculously large reserve of ritual energy could make such a reckless counterattack possible.

“You idiot... Resorting to something that crazy...!”

Slamming into the container behind her, Shio groaned powerlessly as she slowly slid down and collapsed.

Right after unleashing that ritual energy, Yukina's body became completely, utterly defenseless. Had her timing been off even a single split second, she very well could have died from Shio's kick landing squarely.

“I'm sorry. I didn't think I could win against you any other way, Hikawa.”

She looked down at Shio with a neutral expression as she spoke.

Her emotionless, machine-like eyes sent chills down Shio's spine.

Now that she thought about it, Yukina had seemed a lot more human since meeting Kojou Akatsuki. Clumsy as it was, she showed her emotions and often acted as if she were a completely normal girl.

But the girl in front of her was different. This was the Yukina Himeragi that Shio knew from back during training at High God Forest. This was Yukari Endou's prodigy, admired and feared by her fellow Attack Mage candidates. When she'd been chosen to be the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, everyone had accepted it. Even the Fourth Primogenitor would surely perish at

her hand— This Yukina Himeragi, like a blade polished to a fine edge, shifted her gaze toward the cowering Avrora.

“Sheesh...well, doesn’t this suck.”

Crunch, went the pill capsules between his teeth as Motoki Yaze stepped before Yukina.

Shio gawked as she watched. She didn’t think Yaze would be able to do much against a girl who even a fellow Attack Mage couldn’t hold a candle to.

“Upperclassman Yaze...?”

Yukina must have been as perplexed as Shio. Her eyes swayed ever so slightly from bewilderment.

Yaze, however, just smiled impetuously, spreading his arms wide as if to hide Avrora behind him.

That instant, a gale swirled up out of nowhere and blew Yukina away.

“What are you gonna do, li’l Himeragi? Your spear can’t nullify my power.”

Yaze warned her in a provocative tone of voice. Seeing that made everything click for Shio. This was Motoki Yaze’s true nature—a Hyper Adapter who could freely manipulate the air. He’d used that ability to make his voice reach Yukina and lead her to the warehouse.

Although his ability wasn’t too strong in and of itself, between generating invisible blades using air pressure, destroying cellular structures through use of a vacuum, and so forth, it gave him many avenues to kill as the situation demanded. On top of that, because it didn’t use ritual energy, there was no way to predict its attacks.

“.....”

However, Yaze’s unexpected ability only shook Yukina for a brief moment.

She took out some metallic spell tablets, which changed into a quartet of wolves. These swiftly scattered to surround Yaze from four sides.

Yaze’s composure gradually faded. The nature of his ability to control air rendered him unable to strike in multiple directions at once. Beyond that, his air

pressure moves were unlikely to have much effect against inorganic matter. Defeating metallic *shikigami* would be a long shot.

He had only one option left: defeating Yukina, the caster, before her familiars attacked.

She understood that as well. The issue was whether peering into the future would actually let her evade Yaze's invisible attacks—this was a gamble for her.

The atmosphere between the pair facing off grew so strained that one could scarcely breathe. But then, an unexpected individual broke the tension. Slipping past Yaze's flank, a girl with golden hair approached Yukina.

"Eh? Hey, Av-baby...?! Don't! Stay put!"

Forgetting that he was in the middle of combat, Yaze tried to stop the vampire girl.

Yukina, too, seemed to scarcely believe her eyes as her target for elimination drew near.

Looking straight back at the surprised Sword Shaman, Aurora pleasantly smiled.

It wasn't her usual fearful expression. It was a defenseless smile, the kind you only showed to a trusted friend.

"Yuki...na..."

Aurora spoke her pursuer's name; a name she shouldn't have known.

Yukina and Yaze both stiffened as if struck by an electric jolt.

Then the pair remembered. From the time she had been destroyed by Kojou one year earlier until being revived in the body borrowed from Hektos, Aurora's soul had been possessing Nagisa Akatsuki. She and Nagisa had shared memories.

"Y...Yukina Himeragi...is thy treacherous act in service to Kojou?"

Puffing up her chest and striving to maintain all the dignity she could, Aurora asked the other girl that question. Her tone of voice had returned to that of her usual self, but it was crystal clear that she had inherited memories from Nagisa.

She closed in on the bewildered Yukina and touched the tip of Snowdrift Wolf, thrust toward her, with her own chest.

“Then I permit thee. With this purging spear, usurp mine soul.”

“...?!?”

Yukina’s hand trembled around her lance. Aurora closed her eyes and waited for her to strike.

“Don’t, Av-baby!”

“Himeragi...stop...!”

Yaze and Shio shouted. But even if they’d tried to stop Yukina, the range between her and Aurora was too close. All it would take for her to destroy Aurora was the slightest thrust of her spear.

And yet, Yukina did not move. She kept still, as though frozen solid. Her voice trembled.

“Why...?”

Yukina watched Aurora submit with moist eyes that seemed on the verge of tears. Poking out of the collar area of the vampire’s coat was a Saikai Academy middle school uniform.

Itogami Island was a Demon Sanctuary, where even the World’s Mightiest Vampire could attend school like any normal person. It was easy to imagine that Aurora Florestina was wearing that uniform because of how deeply she yearned to spend her days like that.

This threw Yukina astray. After all, she was trying to kill Aurora to protect Kojou Akatsuki’s everyday life.

“Even...if I don’t destroy you...Akatsuki-senpai will continue to suffer all alone...”

Strength left her hands. The silver spear clattered to the floor.

Speechless, Shio stared at Yukina.

That island really had changed her underclassman. Perhaps this was a change one shouldn’t have hoped for in an Attack Mage. But as a person, as a friend,

Shio was fond of her.

“Thou need not be concerned, Priestess of the Sword. I have already been destroyed once.”

Picking up the lance, Avrora held it out to Yukina. Her blue eyes spoke loud and clear: If she had to be eliminated to save Kojou Akatsuki, then Yukina should destroy Avrora without hesitation.

The Sword Shaman frailly shook her head. The next instant, she snatched the spear out of Avrora’s hand. The pale glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect enveloped the spear as Yukina swung it about.

“—?!!”

“Himeragi!”

Yaze and Shio sharply inhaled. But they had no time to stop Yukina as she thrust the lance forward.

It sheared off several strands of Avrora’s blond hair and sent them dancing into the sky.

The spear nearly grazed her slender neck, running right past it. Then two metallic objects collided, sending a high-pitched sound echoing throughout the warehouse.

Yukina’s lance had blocked a silver long sword swinging down at Avrora from behind.

This was the Lion King Agency’s Rosen Chevalier Plus—

It was this divine armament, swung to rend Avrora asunder, which Yukina had fended off.

“Why did you stop me, Yukii?”

The long sword’s wielder glared at Yukina with a reproachful look. She was a serious-looking girl with a crisp, tidy atmosphere about her. But in that moment, the gentle impression she normally gave off had vanished.

“...Yui?!”

Shio exclaimed, baffled at the sudden interloper. Despite just witnessing it

with her own two eyes, she couldn't believe the girl had just tried to do Aurora in.

"I'm glad you're safe, Yuri! But why...?!"

"Sorry, Shio."

Keeping her back to Shio, she spoke like a girl on the edge of a cliff.

"Don't get in my way, either, Yukii. If you do, an outbreak will destroy the island."

"Outbreak...?!"

Shouting so hard she practically spat blood, Shio descended into utter confusion.

"What do you mean by that? Explain!"

"I see...the Blazing Banquet..."

Yaze's face twitched as he made a low groan. Undiluted fear hovered in his eyes.

"The Blazing Banquet? Why would the ceremonial ritual to awaken the Fourth Primogenitor happen now of all times...?"

Shio asked back, dumbfounded. With Kojou Akatsuki already claiming the role of the Fourth Primogenitor, she couldn't see why the ritual to revive the Fourth Primogenitor would activate.

Yaze, however, shook his head with an anguished look.

"Right now, Kojou's an incomplete Fourth Primogenitor. He's one short of the Beast Vassals he needs to return to his proper form."

"...Then Yukina Himeragi attempted to kill Aurora to make Kojou Akatsuki a complete Fourth Primogenitor, and therefore prevent an outbreak...?"

Shio stared at Yukina in surprise. If those were the stakes, then she could certainly understand why Yukina had suddenly attempted something so wicked. Small wonder that Koyomi Shizuka had ordered her to eliminate Aurora.

And now, Yuri was trying to kill Aurora for the exact same reason.

Shio no longer knew what to do. The same probably went for Yukina.

“Back off, Yukii. Or do you want to make Kojou kill her instead?”

Yuii posed that barbed question to Yukina, as though goading her hesitance.

“That’s...!”

It was plain as day that Yuii had shaken her.

Taking advantage of that opening, Yuii struck.

“—Mist!”

Yuii’s form became vague and hazy as it splintered apart in a body-splitting attack, a mixture of illusion and high-speed movement. This was the secret technique she’d inherited from her master.

Normally a boon, Yukina’s Spirit Sight had now become the very thing preventing her from defending against the blow. The production of countless clones resulted in a quantity of branching futures far greater than what she could process, which left her immobilized.

“Nn...!”

Sustaining Yuii’s mighty body ram, the small-statured Yukina could not help but go flying. Even Shio spontaneously covered her eyes at the tragic sight.

“That girl has a cute face, but man, she’s brutal...”

Yaze murmured that scathing critique. He wasn’t referring to the body-splitting technique that had overwhelmed Yukina; he was talking about how Yuii had invoked Kojou’s name beforehand. The latter was the target of his assertion.

“If she didn’t do that, there’s no way she could put Yukina Himeragi out of commission.”

“She didn’t have much of a choice,” responded Shio in Yuii’s defense.

If two Sword Shamans with superhuman combat capabilities clashed head-on, it was highly probable that one would sustain grave wounds from which she would never recover. Yuii had opted to shake her opponent mentally to avoid that.

It was a choice that was very much like her, kinder to her junior than anyone. And it was out of that very kindness Yuiri would slay Aurora by her own hand.

“Sorry, Aurora.”

She slowly raised her blade high.

The vampire made no move to flee. Offering a fleeting smile, she closed her eyes, awaiting the downswing of Yuiri’s weapon.

Her attacker bit her lip hard enough to make blood ooze out and strengthened her grip on her sword; the next instant, a girly, high-pitched voice reverberated throughout the abandoned warehouse.

“—Primus Minium!”

Suddenly, a pitch-black whirlwind blew Yuiri away, sword and all. Its momentum proceeded to destroy the abandoned warehouse building itself. Containers were flung up and broken apart one after another, and the walls and ceiling were pulverized in an instant. The move was incredibly destructive; it was as though cannon shells had poured down into the building.

“Wha—?!”

“Yuiri!”

Yaze and Shio exclaimed as they rolled onto the floor.

The wind showered Yuiri head-on before she collapsed, bleeding from the head.

Staring down at her was a pitch-black bicorn flickering like a mirage. A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—no, of The Blood.

“Unfortunately, I cannot permit you to harm her.”

A boy dressed in a tailcoat stood where the main entrance to the warehouse had once been.

By his side was a large man wearing a mask patterned after a reptilian skull—member of the Order of the End.

“The Blood...”

Collapsed, Yukina lifted her wobbly head as she invoked his name.

“The Blood...?! That kid’s really him?!”

Shio’s eyes widened in shock as she poised her silver recurve bow.

The instigator of the Electoral War and the mastermind of the Order of the End was standing right before their eyes. But even if they understood that in their heads, they couldn’t help but feel like something was off upon actually encountering him in person. They were staring at The Blood’s true form, a young boy strongly resembling Aurora.

“I have come for you, Sister.”

The boy spoke reverentially as he extended a hand toward the girl.

Aurora was the only one standing normally amid the warehouse being ravaged by the whirlwind. Only the air around her was calm; it was as if she was enveloped by an invisible wall. The Blood was protecting her.

“Now, Sister. Come.”

The Blood repeated himself to hurry her along.

But Aurora didn’t budge. All she did was give a tiny shake of her head as if to defy him.

“Sister, please.”

Apparently at the end of his rope, The Blood raised a stronger voice.

“Uu, uuu...”

Aurora gingerly backed away. A white mist started to envelop her body.

The frigid miasma seemed to be freezing her over. Demonic energy was leaking out from Aurora’s body.

Transparent snow crystals danced in the wind, gently melting in the dawn sky.

CHAPTER FOUR
REUNION OF THE
VAMPIRE PRINCESS

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1

The huge demon beasts pursuing them emerged from all sides of the labyrinthine shopping mall.

Their sprinting along made the ground shake with ceaseless tremors. Their wriggling tentacles wreaked indiscriminate destruction upon the stores, their huge frames squishing and wrecking one structure after the next. It was a scene straight out of a disaster movie.

“Fooour, fiiiive, six, seven... Seven critters in all. More than I thought. I have to wonder, who cleans up all the droppings they leave behind?”

After confirming the number of demon beasts, Yuno voiced that question. She said it with a carefree tone. It was hard to tell if she was joking or actually being serious.

“Is this really the time to bring up that nonsense?”

Shizuri gripped the hilt of her long sword as she shouted.

Last time the type of monster known as IX-4 appeared on Itogami Island, it had exhibited the dangerous characteristic of absorbing surrounding magical energy to grow larger.

Shizuri’s demonic sword, which robbed anything it sliced of magical energy, was one of the few effective weapons against them. Nevertheless, there were simply too many foes for them to defeat. Rui and Yuno must have also been aware of that.

In spite of all that, the two were shockingly calm.

“IX-4...Proitogaminodon Magus Nipponix, was it? But these differ from the

individuals confirmed to date. They're clearly a closely related, artificially modified species. Fascinating."

Rui calmly commented his observations of the demon beasts.

The Unknowns in the Keystone Gate were smaller than the one they'd encountered previously. Instead, these were agile and highly intelligent. They'd formed a pack and had attacked in a coordinated fashion. Their threat level had to be higher than IX-4's had been.

"Well, fine. We'll draw these kids off, so go on ahead of us, Shizurin."

Yuno smiled boldly as she spoke. Shizuri turned back to them, aghast.

"Wh...what are you saying?! The two of you can't possibly take on so many Unknowns at onc—"

"Rainbow Dragon Fist Number One, Talon Cry—!"

Before she even finished her sentence, Yuno slammed a palm strike into the demon beast before her. Although it was far slower than her usual blows, the instant her palm touched it, the demon beast's huge body shuddered.

The creature roared as the shock wave pierced its hide, unable to endure the agony. Yuno was destroying the Unknown's cells one by one from the inside out.

"Yin and yang, thy have a name, yet no form. Accordingly, thy fist is formless... and stuff. Ms. Sasasaki taught me this technique, so I'm glad it paid off so soon."

"M-Miss Yuno..."

Shizuri's eyes bulged at her teammate's unexpected growth.

Over the last several days, Yuno had spent time with "Mystic" Misaki Sasasaki—a member of a group of combat masters who went by the Wizards of the Four Fists. Evidently, Yuno had put that time to good use by training under her.

An excellent hand-to-hand fighter to begin with, Yuno was probably exceptionally well suited to Misaki's teachings, a combination of the mystic and the martial arts. In a scant few days, she'd grown to the point where she could duke it out with an Unknown on equal footing. This was the source of her

composure.

“I suppose so. I never thought a chance for a rematch would come so soon.”

Behind the surprised Shizuri, Rui opened fire with his pistol-type Spell Throwers.

His spell bullets looked downright puny compared to the huge demon beast he faced. They couldn't even hope to penetrate its hide. And yet, the instant the bullets touched it, his opponent's outer hide collapsed and fell away as if it was being dissolved. He'd corrupted its cellular composition via a curse.

Consuming the demon beast's demonic energy, the curse's power grew greater and greater until it covered its target's entire body.

This was the same type of curse that Kiriha Kisaki had employed in the Armor-Type Simplified Cursed Spear—aka “Flat”—she had used to eliminate IX-4. Apparently, Rui had independently analyzed the data of Flat, the Bureau of Astrology's secret weapon, to complete a ritual bullet of the same kind.

Yuno and Rui had both lost to IX-4 once upon a time. Even if they never showed it, neither had forgotten the humiliation. Thus, they'd quietly polished up countermeasures against the Unknowns. Despite how happy-go-lucky they usually seemed, they couldn't stand losing.

Thanks to that, Shizuri and the others could fight toe-to-toe against the Unknowns they had fought with such great difficulty in the past.

“Squad Leader, please go ahead of us. MAR must be out of security pods in the area if they're sending in demon beasts.”

“Roger that... So be it!”

Rending the tentacles an Unknown had sent flying after her, Shizuri tried to head deeper into Keystone Gate.

However, the instant she broke from the demon beasts' encirclement, Shizuri ground to a halt on pure instinct.

The next second an explosive shock wave betraying immense bloodlust raced by right before her eyes.

The blade was wreathed in a pale flame of demonic energy... The aura

seemed to pulse from the sword itself.

“Shizurin?!”

“I am all right. This is nothing...!”

Her back still turned to Yuno, Shizuri adjusted her grip on her blade.

She pointed the tip of her sword to a woman with a white robe wrapped around her.

The woman clutched a curved sword that traced a gentle arc. Beautiful agate-colored horns that looked like gemstones protruded from her temples.

“So the Order of the End finally shows itself... What happened to that tacky mask of yours?”

Shizuri directed her inquiry toward the acolyte of the Order of the End, an ogre swordswoman.

The woman looked like she was in her midtwenties. Shizuri couldn't make out much of her physique, but as the woman bluntly readied her curved sword, Shizuri sensed an odd melancholy about her. It came from the incredible amount of hatred her opponent harbored.

“Hear me, traitorous daughter of the Castiellas. I am Izea Nios.”

The ogre identified herself in a low voice.

Her statement made Shizuri knit her brows.

“You're mentioning that again...?! Just who have I betrayed?!”

“Is not the attire you wear proof of your betrayal, daughter of the Castiellas?”

“Do you have some kind of grudge against Gisella?!”

Shizuri rudely prompted back, unable to restrain her irritation.

The ogre's eyelids twitched slightly in anger.

“How shameless. Or are you simply ignorant that the Paladins of Gisella destroyed our people?”

“...Ogres...destroyed by Gisella?”

Shizuri murmured this, taken aback.

Seizing that momentary opening, the woman swung her curved sword. Shizuri blocked the demonic energy–infused azure blade with her deep crimson long sword. The surrounding air creaked as the two weapons collided.

“What do you know of Gisella?”

The ogre smashed her curved blade in with brute force.

“I mean seriously, what is Gisella? A group of knights protecting humankind from demons? A charitable organization preserving rare demon species that are nearly extinct?”

With Shizuri thrown off balance, the woman charged in, leading with her body. The hit from the woman’s ram attack sent Shizuri flying.

“No, that’s wrong. Gisella is a band of pillagers. They destroyed a great many demons in the name of converting them, plundering their wealth in the process. And to add insult to injury, they whisked away demon children and raised them to serve as soldiers for their own cause. That is what you Paladins of Gisella are.”

Shizuri barely managed to continue fending off Izea Nios’s follow-up strikes.

One certainly could not describe her swordsmanship as polished, yet however unpracticed it seemed, it left no openings. She’d forged this personal style of swordcraft on the field of battle. It boggled Shizuri’s mind to even contemplate how many duels she must have undergone.

Even so, Shizuri endured Izea’s ferocious assaults. The training she’d accumulated in her quest to become a paladin was helping Shizuri hold out, largely on an unconscious level.

This must have rubbed her opponent the wrong way; Izea was exuding incredible bloodlust.

“White hair is the mark of ogre royalty—how could you of all people wield the divine armament Hauras as part of the group that destroyed our people?!”

“Khh!”

Shizuri’s expression stiffened in shock. The blue curved sword Izea swung high was enveloped with a dazzling radiance—the light of demonic energy.

“—Demonstrate my rage, Radia!”

A beam enveloped Shizuri. The vast amounts of demonic energy it scattered about even made the Unknowns halt for a second.

The beam rent the floor asunder and smashed the wall behind Shizuri.

“Squad Leader...!”

“Shizurin?!”

Rui and Yuno turned back in shock.

Sword still pointed downward, Izea Nios breathed raggedly. The glow of demonic energy had already been banished, but they couldn’t make out Shizuri amid the dust dancing in the air.

But—

“...e allora...?”

They sensed her coughing amid the particles.

Izea lifted her face in surprise, hastily repositioning her curved sword.

“That’s...your reason? Why you...became a member of the Order of the End...”

Shizuri doffed her headscarf and slowly revealed herself. Although her pure-white coat was scorched and smoking, she’d somehow come out unscathed. Even for an ogre, she was unbelievably resilient.

“That’s right. I do not recognize the Holy Ground Treaty. There’s no way I can let humanity, the very species that brought us to the brink of extinction, coexist with Demonkind as if nothing ever happened.”

As though wary of Shizuri’s bizarre fortitude, Izea spoke while carefully maintaining her distance.

Shizuri looked back upon the woman with scorn.

“And so...you want to make the Fourth Primogenitor go berserk so that he can destroy the other primogenitors...? Hah... That’s a trivial, idiotic motive if I ever heard one.”

“What did you say...?! ”

Izea's expression contorted with anger. Shizuri let the ogre's bloodthirsty gaze wash over her with annoyance before returning a smile fiercer than she'd ever given before.

"You...have this all wrong."

"...All wrong?"

"You seem to think I'm unaware of Gisella's past deeds!"

"What...?!"

When Shizuri pounded home her crimson long sword, Izea blocked it with her curved blade. But Shizuri ignored this and continued to brandish her sword with mighty force.

"Gisella's efforts to propagate its own faith were obviously excessive, and it committed many sins as a result. Sometimes their actions sparked conflicts, which generated misery that could never be undone."

"—Then why did you become their pawn?"

"Because I have faith that Gisella's ideals were not in error!"

Shizuri yelled back, unleashing a flurry of sword strikes. With relentless attacks both vertical and horizontal, she circled around Izea's defensive stance. For the first time, Shizuri's will surpassed Izea's.

Gisella was a heretical sect that splintered off of the Western European Church. According to their teachings, their members both had a duty to protect humanity from Demonkind and a duty to take demons under their care.

These ideals became the basis of numerous conflicts.

It was Gisella that had announced the existence of the ogre species to the world, thus creating the cause of their decline. Influenced by Gisella's teachings of love, the ogre royals defenselessly welcomed human plunderers filled with malice, resulting in a genocide of a severity rarely seen in all of history.

"But even so," shouted Shizuri.

"Long before adoption of the Holy Ground Treaty, only Gisella extolled the coexistence of humankind and Demonkind. Scorned and hated by their fellow

humans as heretics, they never wavered in their creed. And they sought to atone for their sins without ever averting their eyes from the past—that's why the queen of the ogres entrusted Hauras to them!"

Shizuri wore an expression filled with pride as she swung her crimson blade without the slightest hesitation.

The ogre tribe had a scant few members and was teetering on the brink of extinction. Shizuri had lost her family at a young age, so it would have scarcely been strange for her to lose her life as well.

But the Paladins of Gisella had saved her.

That was how she wound up living with them—and why she had chosen of her own volition to be their final paladin.

"Silence...!"

Izea forced back Shizuri's sword. And yet, Shizuri's blows did not cease.

"Gisella's actions may have accelerated the destruction of the ogres. But when poachers and slavers aiming for their horns hunted our people to ruin, Gisella was the only one to fight on their behalf!"

"I told you to be silent!"

"And yet, because of your grudge against Gisella, you seek to erase the Holy Ground Treaty and make unrelated people suffer. That I cannot permit. As the last Paladin of Gisella, I shall stop you!"

"You little bitch!!"

Izea violently kicked Shizuri in her side. She took the blow in stride. It was Izea who let out an anguished moan as her bones creaked.

At that moment, Izea finally realized the nature of Shizuri's bizarre level of toughness. The girl had called it the Blessing of a Paladin, but in reality, she was subconsciously deploying a bio-ward demonic energy.

Ogres had resilient bodies to begin with, so they had no reason to add a bio-ward—to learn the art of using one's inner *qi*. But Shizuri, raised alongside human beings, had absorbed those teachings as if they were second nature.

She was both an ogre and a full and proper Paladin of Gisella. Izea appreciated this fact for the very first time.

“—This fang is the light that rends our darkness. Its breath is the flame that repels evil!”

The shaken Izea was before her as Shizuri solemnly incanted a spell.

A crimson glow enveloped the undulating blade of her long sword. She was going to release her demonic energy at point-blank range, blowback be damned. Without her own bio-ward, Izea would have no means to block it.

“Why you...!”

“Thy name is the fire-eating Serpent. Born of the soul of a saint, thou art the immutable blade—”

Shizuri slammed down the scarlet sword teeming with power.

The beam-like blade grazed Izea’s ear as it sent her azure sword flying. The fine-edged brand of energy sliced the ceiling of the shopping mall, bringing clumps of concrete falling down one after another. It also cleaved the waterfall, spraying water everywhere.

Her eardrums stung with pain as a violent gale raged across the area. Blood gushed from Izea’s shoulder.

But that was all the damage Shizuri had done. Izea stood there in bewilderment, unable to believe she’d sustained little more than a shallow cut to the shoulder. Shizuri had changed the arc of her sword an instant before ripping Izea’s body asunder.

“...Why...didn’t you finish me?”

Her weapon gone, Izea asked that like a woman adrift.

“Why am I obligated to kill you?”

Shizuri shot a disinterested glance at Izea, who had lost all will to fight and accepted defeat.

The ogre had slammed all her raw enmity and loathing into her opponent, yet Shizuri didn’t even view her as an enemy that needed to be put down. Now Izea

knew.

Shizuri hadn't been looking down on her. As the Paladin of Gisella, she saw Izea not as her foe but as a demon she was obligated to protect.

As far as Shizuri was concerned, the ideals of Gisella were more than empty words. Her actions had proven this to Izea.

"I have no time to deal with you any further. If you're satisfied, I would ask that you politely withdraw—"

Steadying her breath, Shizuri walked past Izea on her way farther down the corridor.

The ogre gazed back wordlessly before she suddenly let out a gasp and lifted her head. Then she shoved Shizuri's shoulder, hard.

"Wh-what are you...?!"

Buckling over, Shizuri glared back at the other woman.

Warm fluid struck Shizuri's cheek. Crimson fluid that had scattered from Izea.

Izea collapsed forward, hands still outstretched from thrusting her opponent to safety.

The robe she wore was tattered and stained with the fresh blood gushing out of her. It was as if some giant, invisible blade had slashed her up without a sound.

"Wha—?!"

Mouth agape, Shizuri supported Izea.

There was no doubt that Shizuri would have taken the attack had the ogre not thrust her aside. Izea had saved her.

"The Order of the End...?! There's still more?!"

Upon defeating the last of the Unknowns, Yuno shouted as she raced to her friend's side.

Behind Izea, a new figure had emerged in the dimly lit corridor—a tall man in a suit.

Although he was Asian, his skin was bone white, and his face was plastered with a perpetual smile.

This was the man who had swung the invisible blade to rip Shizuri to shreds.

“No...he’s not from the Order of the End.”

Rui exclaimed this with his Spell Throwers raised. Despite usually being unflappable, even his voice was shaking. That was just how unexpected this man’s arrival was.

“President of Magna Ataraxia Research...Shahryar Ren...!”

Rui voiced his name.

Shizuri, however, couldn’t catch any more than that because an invisible blade swung down to assault them once more.

Though she tried to block it by emitting demonic energy, her foe’s invisible slice attack slipped right through Hauras. Whatever the invisible strike was, it didn’t run on magical energy.

His attack tore through Izea once more and sent fresh blood flying from her back.

The instant she witnessed this, something inside Shizuri snapped.

“Aah...aaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

Brandishing her crimson long sword, she charged at the man wearing a frigid smile.

A moment later, countless robot tanks emerged from behind him—Shahryar Ren. The MAR robot tank unit trained its gun barrels upon Shizuri all at once.

“Don’t, Squad Leader! Get back!”

“Shizurin!”

Rui and Yuno shouted at the top of their lungs.

The sound of the tank unit’s antipersonnel machine guns drowned out their cries.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

A silver flash sliced apart the frigid mist surrounding the blond girl.

Avrora looked on in surprise as Yukina leaped into the raging, demonic energy-infused whirlwind, intent on shielding the girl. Yukina looked back at the vampire and smiled for the briefest of moments.

Protecting Avrora was outside of the bounds of Yukina’s mission. Eliminating her was the surest way to stop the Blazing Banquet.

So long as Avrora’s seal remained unbroken, the Blazing Banquet could not be contained. Perhaps all Yukina was doing was forcing the decision onto Kojou.

But that was something Kojou should choose for himself. If The Blood whisked away Avrora, the Blazing Banquet would happen whether he wanted it to or not—and there was no way she could let that happen.

“Move aside, Yukina Himeragi. I have no desire to harm you.”

The Blood watched Yukina guard Avrora as he spoke that warning.

He aspired to hoist up the Fourth Primogenitor as a symbol of fear incarnate. And since she was Kojou’s Blood Servant, The Blood needed her power to realize his ambitions. As far as he was concerned, she had no value beyond that. If she ignored his warning and defied him, he would have no reason to hold back.

“Yukina...!”

Avrora called out to her. *Heed me not and run* was her message.

“It’s all right. I *will* bring you with me to Akatsuki-senpai!”

Yukina shook her head without hesitation, rejecting her appeals.

“Quit it, li’l Himeragi...!”

The whirlwind buffeted Yaze as he shouted in desperation. Yuiri was on the ground, injured. The only thing Shio could accomplish was staying put so that she didn’t get blown away. Only Yukina, protected by the Divine Oscillation

Effect of Snowdrift Wolf, was exempt from the effects of The Blood's Beast Vassal.

"So that's how it's going to be. How disappointing."

Sighing slightly, The Blood raised his right hand.

Something looked off about him to Yukina. But before she could deduce what that was, his Beast Vassal raised a neigh.

The pitch-black bicorn slammed one of its enormous hooves downward toward her.

In response, she thrust her silver spear forward, receiving the hoof head-on.

It was a mass of demonic energy enveloped by raging winds. Its might was on par with the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire.

Even if you had demonic energy—nullifying properties of the Schneewaltzer, this creature wasn't the sort of opponent you could take head-on.

But the wellspring of spiritual power coursing through Yukina beyond human limitations willed that possibility into being.

Wings of light spread from her back as she repelled the bicorn's enormous frame.

"The abilities of Faux-Angel, hmm?"

The Blood let out a murmur of admiration. All excess confidence had vanished from his voice. In fact, it was tinged with a blatant nervousness unfit for a vampire who boasted an inexhaustible supply of demonic energy.

But when it came to having little room for error, Yukina was the one backed into a corner.

Even tapping into spiritual energy beyond her limits, the best she could achieve was parity with a single one of The Blood's Beast Vassals. And as the prototype of the Fourth Primogenitor, The Blood had twelve at his beck and call.

"Come forth, Primus Succinum!"

His expression contorted with pain as he summoned a second Beast Vassal.

Pitch-black magma gushed out from the artificial soil, changing into the form of a giant minotaur.

“Khh!”

Yukina’s eyes wavered with despair. The minotaur swung its giant ax at the immobilized girl.

Seeing this, Aurora rushed forward, her entire body enveloped with a white mist once more. She was releasing the Beast Vassal within her body.

Just then, she halted at the sound of an incredible roar behind her.

It was a roar like beautiful, subtle music, or perhaps a roar like countless humans screaming.

“—Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He Who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath...!”

A girl chanted a prayer in a serene voice.

Then the glow of giant magic circles spread above Yukina and the others’ heads.

These circles multiplied in overlapping layers as if to form the barrel of a cannon. High-density ritual energy beams burst out from them with incredible force. The roar of whistling arrows had formed a spell for an ultra-large-scale cursed cannonball.

“Der Freischütz ritual artillery attack...! Kirasaka?!”

Shio’s eyes glimmered as she looked overhead.

Standing on the roof of the half-wrecked warehouse was Sayaka Kirasaka, clutching a silver recurve bow.

The Der Freischütz was a Lion King Agency area-suppression weapon. Its instant ritual energy rivaled a large-scale ceremonial spell in strength.

The ritual spell artillery attack produced an abnormal reaction even in The Blood’s Beast Vassals as it washed over them. They dissolved into a bloody mist before vanishing into thin air.

It happened suddenly, as if their demonic energy had run dry.

“I made it in time! Looks like you’re all right, Yukina!”

Sayaka’s ponytail flapped around as she leaped down to the ground. Now that The Blood’s Beast Vassals had disappeared, the whirlwind that had been blowing abated.

“Kirasaka...how did you get to Itogami Island? Aren’t the airports completely...?”

Setting her happiness at their reunion aside, Yukina asked this to Sayaka skeptically.

For some reason, the other girl grimaced as if she was remembering something rather unpleasant.

“Er, let’s talk about that later... More importantly, where’s the host for those Beast Vassals from earlier? He’s The Blood, right?”

Sayaka nocked a new cursed arrow as she surveyed the area with a serious look on her face.

“You attacked without even knowing the enemy’s face?”

Shio, wobbling as she rose to her feet, shifted an exasperated gaze toward Sayaka.

Sayaka sullenly pursed her lips.

“I looked into him that much at least...but isn’t he a little on the scrawny side?”

“Scrawny? I mean I guess he looks like a boy, but...”

Glaring at the boy with the flaxen hair as she said this, Shio suddenly gasped.

“...?! ”

Yukina and Aurora simultaneously drew in their breaths.

Even cloaked in the darkness, The Blood was clearly two degrees smaller than before.

His breathing was labored, and he had dropped to a knee on the ground.

His now oversized tailcoat slid down his shoulder. Droplets of sweat gushing from his forehead trickled down his cheeks. His body was spewing a pitch-black mist with a *shhhuuu*. He was indiscriminately leaking demonic energy.

“The Blood is...getting younger...?”

Yukina understood just why she’d felt something was off about him.

When she had first encountered The Blood, he had appeared to be roughly the same age as her. But when they’d met again at the start of the Electoral War, he’d seemed younger than that. And now he was younger still, continuing to regress in age.

“Could it be a consequence of summoning the Beast Vassals...?”

Yukina murmured this, realizing the source of his abnormality.

Even though he possessed power on par with the Fourth Primogenitor, The Blood—Kaleid Blood Number Zero—had been deemed a failed prototype. His current state explained why.

Unable to withstand the vast “negative life force” of a vampire primogenitor, his body was continuing to revert in age. He was not unaging and undying. In place of getting old, he was turning younger and surely would completely vanish someday. That was why he had abandoned becoming a king himself and had entrusted that role to Kojou.

“You...saw...!”

Heaving agonized breaths, The Blood glared at Yukina and the others.

He was out of time. The more he fought, the more power he lost, and the weaker he became. If Kojou learned of this, The Blood would have no chance of achieving victory.

To continue the Electoral War, he only had one option remaining—exterminating everyone present to keep his secret under wraps.

“Kreyd!”

The Blood called out the name of the acolyte on standby behind him—the man wearing a lizard skull—motif mask.

He nodded silently and charged at Yukina and company with incredible force.

“Why you!!”

Sayaka rose to face off against him. Transforming her silver recurve bow to a sword, she slipped into cutting range. Yukina’s expression froze over as she saw this. Sayaka was still unaware of his true nature.

“No, Sayaka! That acolyte is...!”

“Huh...?!”

Just before colliding with the masked man, Sayaka widened her eyes in shock as magma-like flames enveloped his entire body.

The skull mask split apart. The man’s robe burned away in a single instant. His already large frame swelled up to several times that size, transforming into the form of an enormous dragon.

“I...I heard nothing about a dragon...!”

Sayaka could not stop his charge. The difference in mass was simply too great. All she could do was defend herself from the incandescent breath he scattered with a pseudo-spatial severing bulwark.

His tail, enveloped by bronze scales, swept sideways to assail Yukina and the others.

Snowdrift Wolf was powerless against physical attacks that didn’t depend on magical energy. Even with Physical Enchantment firing on all cylinders, Yukina could do nothing but evade it.

As Aurora cowered, unable to even speak, the dragon stretched an enormous forepaw out and grasped her.

“Miss Aurora?!”

The creature spread its enormous wings and soared into the air.

Now that he’d taken her hostage, Sayaka couldn’t use her ritual spell artillery attack. Meanwhile, Yukina and the others could raise neither hand nor foot against him.

“How unfortunate. To think that the Fourth Primogenitor’s Blood Servant

would come to such an end...”

The Blood murmured, coldly glaring upon their desperation.

Yukina watched aghast as he raised his right hand to summon a Beast Vassal.

“Yukina?”

When she stopped moving, Sayaka glanced back at her with a questioning look. Her friend, however, said nothing in reply. She had frozen in place as if turned to stone, fear clouding her eyes.

Lion King Agency Sword Shamans peered an instant into the future as they fought.

Reading the opponent’s actions in advance, she evaded fatal blows and selected the most favorable outcome. That was why Yukina could stand toe-to-toe with demons despite her physical inferiority.

But now that foresight had filled her with despair.

In a single second, The Blood would unleash every one of the Beast Vassals at his disposal. Then Yukina’s future was severed. No matter what action she took, she would not be able to defend herself against his attack. Sayaka, Shio, Yuiri, Yaze—everyone else would fall alongside her. There was no way to alter this fate. Every branching path Yukina could select resulted in a Bad End.

Yet just before despair swallowed her heart, Yukina thought she heard someone’s voice.

Peer not into the future. Slice it open with thine own hands—

She recalled Koyomi Shizuka’s words. All the futures Yukina glimpsed held only despair. She could not choose any branch to avoid that.

Therefore, she had to create her own future, one that should not exist—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah—!!”

Don’t rely too much on Spirit Sight. The teachings of Yukari Endou came rushing back to her.

Peer into a future that does not exist. Move within a future that does not exist. The only fundamental difference was its nonexistence. If she could

recognize it, then surely she could manifest it.

It was like cramming a nonexistent page into a closed book. She was forcing a phantom moment into the continual flow of time.

She would defeat The Blood before he launched his assault. Such was the privilege of an absolute initiative attack—

“Wha...?”

The Blood stared at his severed right arm, dumbfounded.

A noise echoed like the world itself had cracked as time reverted to normal.

The vast demonic energy spewing out of The Blood to summon his Beast Vassals vanished like an illusion. Snowdrift Wolf’s demonic energy—nullifying capabilities had erased his demonic energy.

“Yukina Himeragi...what have you done...?!”

The Blood looked back at Yukina, who’d appeared behind him as if she’d teleported.

Silver spear still raised, she stood unmoving, as though she’d done nothing at all. The time during which she’d struck him did not exist. All that there was to show for it were the results.

“Yukii...”

“That ability... Don’t tell me that’s...Lady Shizuka’s...”

Yui and Shio stared at Yukina incredulously. As members of the Lion King Agency, they knew she’d worked miracles.

“‘Paper Noise’...!”

Sayaka’s voice trembled with shock. This seemed to trigger The Blood’s scream.

“Khh...aaaaaaaah...!”

A pale light like a flame was spreading from his shoulder. Snowdrift Wolf’s Divine Oscillation Effect was eroding his vampiric body.

“Kreyd! Take Sister and go—!”

The Blood shouted his command to the dragon circling above. Even if he was gravely wounded, he could still fulfill his objectives by whisking Aurora away. But...

“Thou shalt...not...!”

Accompanying a low, gravelly voice, a silver light burst from the earth.

This luminescence wrapped around the dragon’s neck, causing his huge form to stagger midflight. An armor-clad swordsman flew toward him. In his right hand, he gripped a two-handed blade of incredible size.

The large bronze dragon shot flames right at the swordsman. No matter how stout his armor, surely he could not endure their scorching heat.

“It’s...futile!”

The swordsman, however, slipped past the blaze and swung his huge sword. His weapon, more mass of metal than blade, easily rent the resilient scales covering the dragon’s hide, causing it to roar in agony.

With its left wing severed up to half its base, the creature plummeted to the sky just like that. Aurora shot out of his hand on impact, then rolled across the ground, unconscious.

The man in full body armor landed before readying his sword once again.

Yukina knew his identity.

“You’re...one of the escapees from the Prison Barrier...!”

“Bruté Dumblegraff...! Why is one of the Georgius...?!”

The Blood glared hatefully at the man as he exclaimed. Naturally, even he hadn’t anticipated an interloper quite like this.

The man in armor—Dumblegraff—spared a glance for neither Aurora nor The Blood as he approached the fallen beast.

“I care not for thee... My only desire is to annihilate all dragons...!”

Raising his huge sword high, the man smashed it into the beast’s flank.

Bruté Dumblegraff, a descendant of the Georgius—the dragon slayers—was a former mercenary and one-time employee of the Western European Church. He

had enhanced his body solely through heretical rituals. His hatred for dragons was so extreme that he'd destroyed a number of cities through excessive combat, which eventually placed him in the ranks of the most notorious criminals. Thanks to Natsuki Minamiya, he was at last incarcerated in the Prison Barrier.

And now that very same Dumblegraff had appeared in the real world to challenge an acolyte of the Order of the End to battle. They could think of only one person behind this.

“Well played, Witch of the Void...!”

The Blood audibly clenched his teeth in irritation.

Dumblegraff lived solely for slaying dragons. He wasn't someone you could trust or leave to his own devices, but so long as Yukina and the others faced one of his sworn enemies, he was unmistakably a dependable ally.

The Order of the End had a dragon among their ranks. Realizing this, Natsuki had no doubt deliberately released Dumblegraff from the Prison Barrier. Since his focus was on defeating dragons, his interests had aligned with their own.

“How...pitiful, ‘Kenon.’”

The Blood grimaced in humiliation as they heard a laughing, scornful voice from behind him.

Shrouded in crimson mist, a small individual in an elegant dress appeared.

They had long purple hair, a shapely face, and white skin. And their body was enveloped in demonic energy that rivaled The Blood's.

“Fallgazer...Aswadguhl Aziz...”

The vampire boy backed away as though afraid.

Yukina and the others were fighting inside the Second Primogenitor's domain. That prolonged combat might cause *him* to make an appearance was hardly unexpected.

No, it was probably the other way around.

The Second Primogenitor had been lying in wait for The Blood. And he'd used

Avrora to bait The Blood out of hiding.

“I was certain that if the Twelfth was backed into a corner, you would reveal... yourself.”

Aswadguhl’s long pure-white fangs poked out of his smile.

If Avrora fell into peril, The Blood would invariably come to save her. He couldn’t allow the vampire girl to release her Beast Vassal and stop the Blazing Banquet.

The Second Primogenitor knew this. That was why he’d let Shio and Avrora go on purpose and had chased them all around. And why he’d lit a fire under Yuiiri to make her try to kill Avrora.

All of it was *his* stratagem to flush The Blood out of hiding.

“I find an easy end to the Electoral War inconvenient, so I had planned to overlook you...but I have changed my...mind. Kenon—in the end, you’re a defective product, a failure unable to endure your own negative life force... Am I wrong? That is most...unsightly.”

Looking down upon The Blood as he continued regressing to a little boy, the Second Primogenitor smiled cruelly. Cowed by *his* bloodlust, The Blood stretched his left hand forth.

“Kuh—Primus Aurum!”

“Are you fine with that? Even with that body you summon a Beast...Vassal?”

A smile like a flower in bloom came over Aswadguhl’s lips. A mist of fresh blood emanated from *his* body and transformed into enormous beasts.

“Re...vive, Battalion of Death...!”

The Second Primogenitor summoned a Beast Vassal composed of dozens of huge, carnivorous dinosaurs, each surpassing ten meters in total length. They all bared their fangs as they assaulted The Blood’s Beast Vassal.

The Beast Vassal of the Second Primogenitor, Aswadguhl Aziz, was actually a single horde of deceased spirits. The malice of the beasts known as dinosaurs, destroyed long, long ago, now constituted a single Beast Vassal.

“Aah...aaaaaaaaaah!!”

The Blood screamed in agony.

The horde of ravenous carnivorous dinosaurs chewed apart the pitch-black, lightning-shrouded lion. To repair its flesh, the pitch-black lion needed to absorb demonic energy from its host.

The Blood’s weakened body could not withstand that depletion of demonic energy. His lethal age regression accelerated instantly.

“—Come forth, Primus Cinereus!”

Backed against the wall, The Blood summoned a second Beast Vassal.

But this wasn’t for resisting the Second Primogenitor. The pitch-black shelled beast spewed mist over The Blood, letting him vanish from sight. He must have conspired to flee after realizing that he couldn’t defeat Aswadguhl.

“Shit...Aerodyne!”

Yaze manipulated the air to whip up a sudden gust of wind and blow away the black miasma. Perhaps because the Beast Vassal’s host had vanished, he managed to sweep it away with relative ease.

But now The Blood was gone. And so was someone else—

“Avrora...?! Avrora, where are you?!”

Shio looked around inside the wrecked warehouse, shouting.

She’d tried to evacuate Avrora’s unconscious body to safety. But all of the sudden, she vanished within Shio’s very arms. The Blood had taken her away.

“Unfortunately...he has es...caped.”

Brushing his purple hair back, Aswadguhl spoke tediously.

The dragon slayer was still locked in combat with his target. But Aswadguhl couldn’t have cared less about that. Since The Blood had escaped, their battle no longer held any meaning to him. The same went for Yukina and her group.

“But it is all...right. ‘Kenon’ no longer has anywhere to...run. The rest, *tee-hee*...let us leave that to the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“To Akatsuki-senpai...?”

Aswadguhl’s suggestive comment made Yukina’s expression harden. *He* knew something about Kojou’s actions.

“What’s the meaning of this, Yukina Himeragi? Where’s Kojou Akatsuki right now?”

Perplexed, Shio asked this of Yukina.

It was Sayaka who answered.

“Kojou Akatsuki went to Keystone Gate.”

“What did you say...?!”

Shio glared at Sayaka in shock.

“Why didn’t you stop him? Right now...Kojou’s body is...!”

Yuri closed the distance to Sayaka with teary eyes.

She had gone as far as to try and kill Aurora in order to stop the Blazing Banquet from activating. If Kojou fought the acolytes of the Order of the End occupying Keystone Gate, however, the chances of the Blazing Banquet activating rose tremendously.

“Nah, I get it... Li’l Kasugaya is at Keystone Gate, huh? And Kojou went there to save her?”

Yaze checked with Sayaka in a composed tone of voice.

Sayaka gave him a wordless nod. To save Shizuri, who’d come into contact with Unknowns, Kojou entrusted saving Aurora to Sayaka while he headed for Keystone Gate.

“Kasugaya...? Shizuri Kasugaya?! Don’t tell me she’s trying to end the Electoral War?!”

Shio exclaimed, bewildered.

The only way to prevent the Blazing Banquet without killing Aurora was to force the Electoral War to a swift end.

Shizuri had entered Keystone Gate in order to do that in a way none had

thought possible. Hence why Kojou couldn't simply abandon her.

And by a twist of fate, The Blood was fleeing toward Keystone Gate with the other key to ending the Electoral War—the Twelfth, Aurora—in tow.

Now it was beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Electoral War would be settled at Keystone Gate.

Yes. No matter how it concluded—

“Senpai...!”

Clenching her silver spear, Yukina shifted her gaze toward the inverted pyramid.

The giant structure serving as the nucleus of Itogami Island stood silently against the darkness.

3

When he arrived at Keystone Gate, Kojou found enough wrecked weaponry to fill the entire corridor to the brim. They were the remains of military-grade armed security pods and anti-demon robot tanks—all MAR's latest models.

Parting the wreckage as he advanced farther in, he caught sight of a pair of acquaintances. It was Rui and Yuno, his former Team Kasugaya teammates, engaged in a fierce bout against two security pods.

“Miyazumi! Amase!”

“Akatsuki? What are you doing here?”

Pistol-form Spell Throwers raised, Rui turned around in complete surprise. If they were cooperating with Shizuri, they of course knew about Kojou's circumstances, too. In spite of them fighting so that he wouldn't use any demonic energy, the man himself had shown up on the battlefield. Small wonder Rui was shocked.

But from Kojou's perspective, Rui and Yuno being there was the surprise.

“Kojikoji, run!”

Yuno shouted at the perplexed Kojou.

When he looked back, grotesque shapes rose into his field of vision; a horde of Unknowns. He didn't understand the circumstances very well, but apparently Rui and Yuno were fighting MAR automated combat weaponry and Unknowns at the same time.

"Nah...these guys bein' here is a huge help!"

Glaring at the approaching demon beasts, Kojou grinned ferociously.

Pitch-black wings shimmering like flames shot from his back. These sliced through the air as if they were sentient beings to pierce straight through the Unknowns' bodies.

Skewered, the creatures writhed and screamed.

"Whoa, what's with that getup...?! Kojikoji's hobby?"

"No one has hobbies whacked enough to grow stuff like this!"

Feeling emotionally drained from Yuno's misunderstanding, he continued deploying the jet-black wings.

The Unknowns, which had enough life force to be practically immortal, began to decompose on the cellular level at an incredible clip. Kojou was sucking out their demonic energy reserves with his black wings.

This way, he could compensate for his lacking demonic energy to postpone the start of the Blazing Banquet a little longer—the Unknowns' appearance had unwittingly worked out in his favor.

At the same time, Rui and Yuno gained more room to breathe with less enemies to worry about. Instantly seizing upon their advantage, they destroyed one MAR-manufactured automated machine after another.

The fact MAR was so blatantly involved in the occupation of Keystone Gate made Kojou blast past *surprised* all the way to *astonished*. The fact that the Unknowns had shown up meant they didn't think there was a need to hide it any longer.

"Where's Cas? Wasn't she with you?"

He asked this as Rui and Yuno continued fighting. Rui fired off a burst of spell rounds as he glanced back.

“We were separated. Squad Leader is fighting the president of MAR by herself.”

“MAR’s...president?”

Kojou’s eyes widened. Naturally, he didn’t think a big shot like him would come to Keystone Gate himself.

“Go ahead of us, Kojikoji! Go save Shizurin!”

Yuno encouraged Kojou as she kicked apart a security pod.

“Got it; leave the rest to me!”

With that, Kojou ran off deeper into Keystone Gate. His wings sliced apart the MAR-manufactured automated weapons trying to bar his path.

“Leave the rest to him, he says... Sure got reliable all of a sudden.”

Yuno narrowed her eyes, deeply moved as she watched from behind him. It was the sort of expression a mother would make as she watched her own child grow.

“I suppose you’re right. That being the case, all we need to do is secure an escape route—though that may prove somewhat difficult.”

Rui let out a small sigh as he glanced up at the sky through the crevice in the ceiling.

The din coming down from above was created by an MAR transport helicopter. They were probably bringing in automated weapons to reinforce the others. This move perfectly demonstrated the strength of the conglomerate’s convictions; it showed that MAR would not let anyone take Keystone Gate, no matter the cost.

By contrast, Rui was just about out of spell rounds. Yuno’s endurance was also at its limit. If they mistimed their retreat, they could wind up getting wiped out entirely instead of securing an escape route.

But even as he looked on morosely, flames suddenly spewed from the

descending transport helicopter. Components scattered along with exploding flames, and the helicopter fluttered and spun as it crashed into the canal.

“Eh? Why...?”

Yuno blinked in total surprise. Then her bestial ears twitched as they picked up something.

Behind Rui and Yuno, from the direction of Keystone Gate’s entrance, they heard the voices of multiple people. After that came the sound of explosions, gunfire, and even sorcery and vampires summoning Beast Vassals.

“This is...”

Rui and Yuno traded glances.

Pouring in from the entrance all at once like an avalanche were ruler candidate demons from all across Itogami Island. They’d noticed the abnormality at Keystone Gate; it had apparently served as a signal for them to band together.

The duo didn’t know what they were after. Perhaps they wanted to win the Electoral War; perhaps it was to give the Order of the End a pounding and bring the conflict to a close. Or maybe they were simply going with the flow, rampaging as they pleased.

But they did know one thing for certain—even MAR could not halt their momentum.

The Electoral War had unmistakably begun moving to its final act.

4

Shizuri Kasugaya lay in a shallow crater that looked as though it had been punched out of the corridor.

Rubble covered half her body. It was a terrible sight. Her coat was charred all over the place and had become largely shapeless. The school uniform beneath it was in tatters, too.

“Cas!”

Sweeping rubble away with his bare hands, Kojou picked up Shizuri. He violently shook the limp girl, desperately calling into her ear.

“Cas! Hey, Cas! Hang in there!”

“...It’s Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella... Who’s this Cas person...?!”

Furrowing her brow, Shizuri sullenly opened her eyes. In contrast to her cruelly wrecked outfit, Shizuri herself was largely unscathed. She was as shockingly resilient as ever.

“You all right, Cas?”

“But of course... This is the blessing of a paladin of Gisella...?!”

The instant she shook her head and tried to sit up, there was an audible *rip* that sounded like fabric tearing. Shizuri’s skirt had snagged on some rubble, sending her fastener flying off its hook, whereupon her skirt smoothly fell down without the slightest resistance.

“Aaaaaahhhh,” went the bestial cry Shizuri raised as she crouched down on the spot.

Kojou instantly averted his eye. She glared at him with tears in her own.

“Y-you saw, didn’t you?!”

“Didn’t you do that to yourself?!”

“Uuu...!”

Pouting, she yanked up her skirt and used her sword belt to force it to stay wrapped around her hips. The bottom of her skirt seemed a lot shorter all of a sudden, but given the situation, he pretended not to notice.

“Well, I’m glad you’re all right at least. Doesn’t look like you’re hurt that bad.”

“I am not all right at all. Plus, that sounds pretty indecent coming out of your mouth.”

She sourly retorted, still pressing down on the hem of her skirt.

“What the hell for?!” said Kojou, baring his teeth before scowling suddenly. He noticed that a member of the Order of the End was on the ground very close to them.

Though barely breathing, she was gravely wounded from spectacular slashes all over her body. If she wasn't a resilient demon, she would have lost her life long before this.

"And her? You did this?"

"No, it wasn't me."

When Kojou inquired, bewildered, Shizuri replied with a hardened expression.

"But this ogre..."

"Yes, she's an acolyte of the Order of the End. She shielded me from an attack from Shahryar Ren—"

"Shahryar Ren...? MAR's president?"

He stared at her in surprise. Ren, top manager of a conglomerate spanning the globe, was so famous that even Kojou knew his name. The president of MAR had attacked an Order of the End acolyte while she was shielding Shizuri. He had no idea what could have brought that about.

Shizuri, however, did not reply any further as she began administering first aid to the acolyte. Beginner-level healing spells could do little beyond stopping bleeding and regenerating surface wounds, but that was all she could do since she wasn't a proper healer.

"Did Shahryar Ren also destroy the security pods?"

"Hmm? No, surely not..."

Shizuri was at a loss for words as she examined the wreckage of automated weaponry scattered around them.

From a quick count, about thirty security pods and robot tanks had closed in on her. But since someone had scrapped them, she'd managed to remain largely unscathed.

The scars on the automated weapons bore a strong resemblance to the attacks that had wounded the Order of the End woman. The grand, chaotic marks suggested a giant bladed object had slammed against them.

But Shahryar Ren, president of MAR, had no reason to destroy his own

company's automated weaponry.

The hell's goin' on? wondered Kojou, but when he and Shizuri tilted their heads, gunfire rang out in the corridor, followed by the screeching sound of vehicle tires spinning against the floor. Someone fighting the automated weapons.

"Haah, haah—!"

Chasing after a retreating robot tank, a diminutive figure leaped out of the darkness. It was a dreadlocked youth clad in outdated streetwear. On his left wrist, he wore a gold bracelet that looked like a manacle for securing prisoners. Kojou had seen identical things previously.

"Hey you, ya ain't gettin' away! Take this—Thunder Ax!"

Face twisted like he was really worked up, the youth swung his right arm high.

That instant, the robot tank's chassis was smashed apart as if rent by some invisible blade.

"How 'bout that! Sheesh, really makin' me work my ass off here...!"

The youth's shoulders rose and fell a bit as he laughed loudly, proud of his victory.

It was then that he narrowed his brows questioningly, only just now noticing Kojou and Shizuri's presence. Kojou pointed at the youth and unwittingly raised his voice.

"You're...! That escaped prisoner from a while back...!"

"Ah? Of all people, it's the Fourth Primogenitor brat? Whatcha come here for at a time like this?"

Keh, the youth went, spitting off to the side as he arrogantly threw questions back at Kojou.

Schtola D was supposedly his name. He was one of the escapees from the Prison Barrier during the Black Bible Incident that had taken place the year before. After losing his fight with Sayaka, he'd returned to the Prison Barrier and should have remained under Natsuki Minamiya's observation ever since.

“This vulgar man is an acquaintance of yours, Kojou?”

Shizuri continued treating the ogre woman as she grimaced with visible displeasure.

“Nah, not exactly an acquaintance but...”

“Aah?! The hell’s with you? Wanna go at it, you sow?!”

Schtola interrupted Kojou’s awkward rebuttal and shouted angrily at Shizuri.

“S—,” she went, aghast. Though her temple twitched, she managed to keep her anger in check with superhuman effort.

“A-are you the one who came to my aid?”

“Haah? Who the hell are you? All I’m doin’ is trashing everyone gettin’ in my way. Like I give a rat’s ass about you, moron.”

“M-moron...?!”

“Why are you puttering around inside Keystone Gate?”

With Shizuri on the verge of snapping and going berserk, Kojou swiftly butted in to confirm that with him.

Schtola glanced morosely back at Kojou.

“I came to kill that Shahryar bastard’s ass. Got special permission to head out from that annoyin’ Witch of the Void to do it, too.”

“Shahryar? You mean Shahryar Ren, MAR’s president?”

“President? That shitty thievin’ jerk sure got himself a lofty, important-soundin’ title.”

“Thief?”

Kojou asked this with a bewildered look on his face. Schtola nodded in utter disgust.

“Yeah. That Shahryar R dude is a survivor of the Devas just like me.”

“Devas? The descendants of the ancient gods... Are you saying you’re one of them?”

She widened her eyes. Schtola bared his teeth with annoyance.

“What?! Ya got a problem with that?!”

“...What’s a Deva survivor doing trying to kill off another one?”

Annoyed at himself, Kojou continued his line of questioning. The conversation wasn’t progressing much since Schtola and Shizuri were at odds with each other.

“I told ya already—the bastard’s a shitty thief.”

He violently stomped apart a piece of wreckage at his feet.

“Shahryar R is a rebel who came down to the surface after robbin’ the legacy of the Devas. We’ve been chasin’ after him to get it back. I’m the only survivor of the group, but thanks to me killin’ the asses of people gettin’ in my way, I got treated like some criminal at some point.”

“...Legacy of the Devas?”

Schtola’s unexpected revelation piqued Kojou’s interest.

However, Schtola simply clicked his tongue as if to indicate he’d said too much already.

“It’s a nasty sorcerous device made usin’ super high-level spells you primitives couldn’t copy even if you all stood on your heads. And I ain’t sayin’ no more.”

“So even you don’t know?”

Shizuri spat back with half-lidded eyes. “Uu,” groaned Schtola, making it seem like she’d hit the mark.

“Oh shaddap, stupid! Well, fine, I ain’t got time ta deal with you all anyway. I gotta go. Don’t get in my way, Fourth Primogenitor. You stick your nose in and I’ll blow ya both away.”

Threatening them for no real reason, Schtola vanished into the corridor, heading deeper into Keystone Gate. Kojou heaved a sigh, feeling extremely fatigued for some reason.

“Just what’s with that vulgar man...?!”

Shizuri puffed up her cheeks, making her displeasure easy to note.

He gave a strained smile and shrugged.

“But what he said is probably true. No way Natsuki would’ve let him go free otherwise. Plus, I heard a rumor from somewhere that MAR grew so suddenly as a sorcerous enterprise ’cause it was using Deva technology. That explains why the president of MAR and The Blood are connected.”

“The Blood... Yes...so it does.”

Shizuri murmured quietly. Like the Fourth Primogenitor, The Blood was an artificially constructed vampire. The people from Devas had built him.

If Shahryar Ren was a descendant of those ancient superhumans, it wouldn’t be strange for him to know The Blood’s true identity. But they still didn’t know what Shahryar Ren was trying to use him to achieve.

Was it better to chase after Schtola and check that out, or was heading back with Shizuri in tow the right call? As Kojou asked himself this, they suddenly heard a strange voice from overhead.

It was a demon beast’s howl that resembled the shout of a high-pitched girl.

“Daaah!”

From the rift in Keystone Gate’s ceiling fluttered down a steel dragon, flapping its giant wings. Shizuri’s eyes bulged as she beheld the sight.

“...D-dragon...?!”

“Hold on, Cas! That’s—”

Kojou stopped Shizuri as she reached her hand toward her sword. Two familiar girls were riding on the creature’s back. Realizing this, she stopped moving.

“Senpai!”

“Kojou Akatsuki! You’re still alive?!”

“Himeragi! Kirasaka...!”

Yukina and Sayaka got off the dragon’s back as it landed. Seeing that no one else had been riding it, Kojou clenched a fist with worry.

“And Aurora...?!”

“She was taken. By...The Blood...”

Sayaka lowered her eyes as she weakly answered his question. Surprised, he drew in his breath.

“Wha...?!”

“I’m sorry, senpai. I...”

“Y-you’re wrong, Kojou Akatsuki! Yukina did nothing wrong!! She tried to protect Avrora Florestina! But—”

When Yukina tried to speak with a voice like that of a child about to break into tears, Sayaka hastily put Yukina behind her back to shield her.

“Dah!!”

That’s right, the steel-colored dragon’s head shake seemed to say.

“Sorry, my mind is all jumbled up.”

Kojou pressed his palms against his temples and closed his eyes. Apparently, The Blood had abducted Avrora in the Second Primogenitor’s domain, and Yukina had gone to kill Avrora, then failed to protect the girl. The situation was so overwhelming that it was hard for him to process what he was hearing.

“Point being, Avrora’s with The Blood?”

“Yes. According to the Second Primogenitor, he’s returning to the Keystone Gate.”

Yukina stared at the steps at the end of the corridor as she spoke.

The Keystone Gate’s underground structures reached forty strata beneath the surface of the sea, but to get there, they would need to pass through the lobby portion they were in currently.

In other words, if The Blood was there, he was in Keystone Gate’s aboveground portions. If they went up those stairs, they’d reach him sooner or later.

“Big help it ain’t more complicated than that. I’ll get Avrora back and end the Electoral War—two birds with one stone.”

Kojou strongly declared this. The more time passed without him doing anything, the higher the chances the Blazing Banquet would occur. Even if it

was pretty dangerous, defeating The Blood and ending the Electoral War was the logical choice to make.

“Kojou...!”

Even as she continued treating the ogre, Shizuri looked up at him with visible concern. He smiled cheerfully to her.

“Cas, you take that person and go back ahead of us. I’m sure Kanase’s old man can manage somehow. Glenda, take care of Cas, ’kay?”

“Dah!”

Kojou’s request left the dragon happily swaying her enormous tail.

Shizuri had depleted her stamina fighting MAR and the Order of the End’s acolyte. She must have understood that she could battle no longer. For once, she accepted Kojou’s one-sided proposal without a word of complaint. But—

“Kojou!”

“Eh?”

When she suddenly called him to a halt, he turned around, defenseless. Shizuri approached without a sound and swiftly brought her face close to his. Her soft lips overlapped with his own.

Unable to comprehend what was happening, Kojou froze in place.

“C...Cas...?”

“Aah... Ah...”

Despite initiating the kiss, Shizuri was now red-faced and squirming. She’d probably originally intended to give him a light peck on the cheek. But since she wasn’t used to kissing, she must have thoroughly missed her target.

Still, she puffed up her chest with a confident air, pretending like she’d planned it that way from the start.

“You have received the blessing of a paladin of Gisella! Be grateful!”

“R-right...”

Staring at her as she practically turned tail and fled, he let out a weary sigh.

Yukina's and Sayaka's eyes were glacial and emotionless as they stared at the side of Kojou's face.



Kojou and the others were sprinting up the emergency stairs, heading to the tenth aboveground floor of Keystone Gate.

The elevators and escalators were out of commission and considering the threat of being sniped by Beast Vassals, they couldn't have Glenda airlift them, either. In the end, they'd had no choice left but to hoof it.

"Kojou Akatsuki! Who was that girl? And why was she k-kissing you...?!"

It was around when they'd climbed as far as the eighth floor that Sayaka, who'd maintained her silence to that point, suddenly asked Kojou to explain. Her expression was tinged with an air of anger that threw him off.

"Why are you upset?"

"F-fghh!!"

It was easy to tell that Sayaka was flustered. She must never have even dreamed her question might be thrown right back in her face.

Wearing an expression that indicated he found this tiresome, he glanced back at her.

"Besides, a kiss like that is basically a good luck charm."

"If anything goes for good-luck charms, how about I slit open your belly and examine your entrails this very moment?!"

"What kind of good-luck charm is that?! That's scary! Himeragi, say something to her, please."

Kojou stared at Sayaka, baffled as to why she'd blown up on him for some reason.

"I believe she has a point."

However, the very woman he'd sought aid from glared back at him with an even more sour expression than Sayaka's.

"Senpai, what are you doing here at Keystone Gate to begin with? Do you

understand the position you're in? What did you plan on doing if your recklessness started up the Blazing Banquet?"

"If you wanna whine, send your complaints to Cas. She's the one who headed into Keystone Gate all alone, so I had to follow her, all right? And then those Unknowns came out on top of everything..."

"Would you still speak the same way if Miss Avrora's sacrifice had been for nothing?"

Yukina asked this of Kojou reproachfully.

It was then that he finally realized why she was angry. He had thought Yukina was pouting because he'd put rescuing Shizuri over her, but it wasn't that at all.

In a sense, Shizuri falling into peril after charging into Keystone Gate was her reaping what she'd sown.

If Kojou had gone on a rampage to rescue her and triggered the banquet as a result, everything would be rendered meaningless: Shizuri's reckless actions to bring the Electoral War to an end all by herself, Yukina's decision to stop the banquet from activating even if it took killing Avrora, and even Avrora's very existence.

Kojou hung his head like a puppy being scolded by his master, weakly and haltingly trying to justify himself.

"With Avrora, I figured since you were there, it'd turn out all right."

"Eh...?"

Yukina's eyes swayed in shock. She clutched her chest, unable to endure her own feelings of guilt.

"B-but I went in intent on...killing Miss Avrora..."

"That may have been what Professor Kitty and the others told you to do, but no way you were gonna do that, right, Himeragi? Hey, Kirasaka. You think so, too, right?"

"Eh? W-well, yes. On occasion you say something nice, Kojou Akatsuki."

With the conversation suddenly tossed to her, Sayaka nodded proudly

multiple times as if to say, *Yeah, yeah*.

Yukina's cheeks reddened as she lowered her face, a conflicted expression hovering over it for a time. But finally, she lifted her head enthusiastically, her spirits restored.

"Be careful, senpai. The Blood has likely abducted Avrora so that—"

"I get it. So I can't consume her, right?"

He twisted his lips into a painful grimace.

"Yes. The Blood yearns for the Blazing Banquet to come to fruition."

"Hearing that makes me rest easier. At the very least, we don't have to worry about Avrora's safety unless it comes to that."

"Yes..."

Yukina raised her eyebrows, slightly surprised. The Blood wouldn't harm Avrora in any way since he had a reason not to. It didn't change the fact that he'd abducted her to drive Kojou into a corner, but the situation wasn't all bad, either.

"It's all right. The Blazing Banquet won't happen. I won't let Avrora fade away."

Kojou smiled as he looked straight at Yukina. His invigorated, smiling face breaking through from parts unknown frightened her for no discernible reason, causing her to plant her feet. Kojou continued regardless.

"But if the time comes that my Beast Vassals go berserk, please, Himeragi. Kill me."

"Senpai...?!"

"You're the only one who can, right? If it's that or living on after stealing the memories from Nagisa and Yaze and everyone at school, I'd rather you do me in. So please."

His laid-back request left her speechless.

The Lion King Agency had dispatched her to be the Fourth Primogenitor's watcher. If he caused a large-scale sorcerous disaster, it was her duty to destroy

him before things got out of hand.

Kojou was just reinforcing that fact. He wasn't saying anything the slightest bit strange.

But she couldn't bring herself to nod at his plea.

"...I... I..."

The silver spear trembled in her hands as her voice caught in her throat.

Then, before Yukina could reply, they heard a quiet voice from above.

"Do not be concerned, Yukina Himeragi. I shall allow no such thing."

Yukina gasped and looked up. Sayaka reflexively held her sword at the ready.

Sharpening his gaze, Kojou stared up in the direction of the voice's echo.

Atop a long stairwell, which led to the Keystone Gate's uppermost corridor, they saw a golden-haired boy.

His outward age was about ten, give or take. He'd folded back the cuffs of the tailcoat of mismatched size, but it was a poor fit to a comical degree. However, both of his blue eyes glowed like flames.

"The Blood...!"

Yukina turned her spear toward the boy.

"You've gotten a lot smaller since the last time I saw you."

Kojou ascended the stairs slowly to reach the same floor where the boy was.

Behind The Blood was a mass of ice about two meters in height.

Sleeping inside that transparent chunk of ice was Avrora. He'd no doubt frozen her over to seal her, averting even the remotest possibility she might unleash the Beast Vassal within. It burned Kojou on the inside, but the boy's method wasn't wrong so far as ensuring Avrora's safety was concerned.

"Gotta say, you look pretty horrible there. If you give back Avrora right now and say you're sorry, I'll spare you the spanking?"

Kojou provocatively curled up the corners of his lips as he gazed at The Blood's wounded form.

“Unfortunately, I cannot do that. I have no reason to give up on the banquet. As you can see, I am a failed model with little life span remaining.”

The vampire boy made a self-deprecating smile. The Blood had lost his right arm, and there was no sign of it growing back. He no longer had enough “negative life force” remaining to repair all the damage done to him. Even as they spoke, demonic energy was vanishing from his body, accelerating his lethal age-regression process.

“But do you not also have little time left, Kojou Akatsuki? Just how long can you keep your Beast Vassals from running amok in your current condition?”

His calm assertion brought a pained smile out of Kojou.

Even if The Blood had little life span remaining, his abilities were on par with Kojou’s—no, the fact he had twelve Beast Vassals in his possession no doubt put him on top. If he fought The Blood like that, it was highly likely Kojou’s Beast Vassals would begin running amok as they sought even greater demonic energy than The Blood’s.

“I get it... The game is this: Do you use up all your life span first, or do I hit my limit first? I don’t mind things being simple like that.”

“What a coincidence. Neither do I.”

The Blood jeered in reply.

“But are you truly satisfied with this? Even if you defeat me, you’ll be forced to annihilate Dodekatos in order to prevent the Blazing Banquet.”

“Well...who knows about that?”

Kojou shook his head evasively. The Blood knit his brows with displeasure. His diction was thrown off ever so slightly.

“The Electoral War and contact with the other primogenitors are nothing more than the triggers. Even if you see this fight through, sooner or later, you will end up consuming the Twelfth, Aurora! Surely you realize this!”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Kojou Akatsuki...!”

Unbridled ire radiated from The Blood's entire body.

"And yet, you duel me even so, Kojou Akatsuki—for the sake of annihilating my pitiable elder sister! Then I shall stop you using all the remaining power that I possess!"

"—No, I won't let you!"

Yukina raced past Kojou, charging toward The Blood.

If he only needed to stop the Electoral War, Kojou didn't need to fight. All she had to do was defeat The Blood before Kojou's Beast Vassals began going berserk. With her Snowdrift Wolf and Paper Noise ability, it was by no means impossible.

She activated Stillness—time that should not have existed.

But her privilege of absolute initiative attack was interrupted in a most unexpected manner.

When she deployed the technique, another Stillness user intervened.

"Oh, no you don't."

"?!"

A woman suddenly appeared before Yukina and blocked her spear with the silver pieces she wore over her fists.

The woman made a leering smirk at her surprised opponent. She was beautiful; gorgeous, in fact. She had a sunny smile that seemed as radiant as the sun itself.

"I am your opponent."

"Miss...Zana Lashka?!"

Yukina exclaimed this as she realized the woman's identity. With Stillness foiled and the time that should never have existed erased, she returned to the normal flow of time. Kojou and Sayaka didn't understand what had happened yet. They were simply taken aback by the arresting woman's sudden appearance.

"The Blood Servant of the First Primogenitor is...?! Why...?!"

Yukina readjusted her lance and stepped backward.

Even as she posed the question, however, she already knew the answer.

The First Primogenitor was staying on Itogami Island to participate in the Electoral War. It would inconvenience him if The Blood lost and the Electoral War came to an end. Zana no doubt had the First Primogenitor's intentions first in mind when she lent The Blood her aid.

Of course, Yukina couldn't dismiss the possibility this was purely Zana's whim. She didn't think she'd serve as the "companion" of a vampire primogenitor if her personality wasn't at least selfish and egotistical.

"Yukina! Get down!"

To support her friend, Sayaka unleashed a slicing attack toward Zana's footing. She was trying to cut right through the floor to pound the woman into the level below them.

Zana, however, simply lashed out with the metal knuckles on her right hand to completely erase Sayaka's technique.

"She nullified the...pseudo-spatial severing?!"

"Divine Oscillation Effect...! How...?!"

Zana's absurdly overwhelming might left both girls shaken. The woman was toying with Snowdrift Wolf and Lustrous Scale—divine armaments from the Lion King Agency's secret trove—with nothing more than simple-looking metal knuckles.

"Oh nooo, you're really cute, too...like."

Brushing back her vibrant red hair that approached gold, Zana Lashka gave her lips a little lick. A beautiful smile came over her as she beckoned Yukina and Sayaka condescendingly.

"I'll take you both on. Now let's dance."

6

Yukina and Sayaka's fierce battle with the beautiful redhead suddenly

appearing from parts unknown began in earnest. Kojou kept the girls in the corner of his vision as he and The Blood traded glares.

He and The Blood were both near their limits. The fight would probably be decided in a single instant. The tension rose between them like a stifling silence between a pair of gunslingers.

“Do you remember the words I spoke to you previously, Kojou Akatsuki?”

A crimson mist enveloped The Blood’s small body. The vast demonic energy transformed into the shape of a beast.

“I said, you cannot defeat me in your incomplete state! And so it remains!”

Demonic energy emanating from Kojou’s back became pitch-black wings that struck The Blood.

But just before they could skewer the boy’s youthful body, Kojou’s wings were swatted away. The Blood had deployed his own pitch-black wings to intercept Kojou’s.

“!!”

“It’s useless, Kojou Akatsuki. I am the prototype Fourth Primogenitor. Even if I am incomplete, even if I am a failure, I can do anything you can!”

A confident smile came over him as he howled.

Compared to Kojou, who had to defeat him while keeping his own Beast Vassals from running amok, all The Blood to do was back his foe to the wall, even if he was annihilated in the process. From the very outset of the battle, Kojou had been at an overwhelming disadvantage.

“And the more demonic energy you use, the closer the hour of the banquet approaches! Victory is mine, Fourth Primogenitor!”

The sable wings protruding from The Blood pierced Kojou’s body again and again.

Blood spilled out of Kojou’s mouth. His vision was dyed crimson.

Falling to one knee on the blood-smeared floor, Kojou smiled ferociously as he tilted forward.

Behind the triumphant vampire, The Blood, was the transparent chunk of ice. The beautiful golden-haired girl slept within, clutching her knees like an infant.

Just like when he'd first met her—

“Reverberate!”

Sayaka scattered silver spell tablets. They transformed into birds of prey that assaulted Zana Lashka from all sides.

“—Roaring Thunder!”

As Sayaka used her *shikigami* to blind, Yukina spun and slammed a heel kick toward Zana. Their coordination was perfect since they'd lived together so long. Their uninterrupted attacks from all directions didn't give Zana the opening to employ Paper Noise. But— “Chassé!”

Zana's body swayed like a mirage, easily slipping past Yukina's attack.

“Glissade assemblé—grand jeté!”

“What are these movements...?!”

Sayaka's face twisted out of nervousness.

The *shikigami* she had unleashed bounced off one after another without so much as touching Zana.

Their foe was moving freely like a passionate dancer on the dance floor. Yukina and Sayaka couldn't keep up with her bizarre movements. Even with their Sword Shaman Spirit Sight, Zana was making sport of them.

“Fouetté!”

She swung her right leg up high to assault Sayaka as if cracking a whip. Sayaka groaned as she blocked with her right hand and her long sword went flying, rolling onto the floor.

“—Fouetté! Fouetté! Fouetté! Fouetté! Fouetté!”

“Wha...?! Khh...!”

Zana spun as she unleashed a flurry of super high-speed kicks. Sayaka crossed her arms, fending off a direct hit, but her opponent cared nothing for her attempts to guard. Zana blew away Sayaka's tall body like a sheet of paper,

driving her as far as the stairwell.

“Sayaka?!”

Yukina let out a brief yelp as she watched her ally being pummeled.

However, Zana’s unending spins gave her no opportunity to deliver Sayaka aid. If she carelessly forced her way in, there was no guarantee she wouldn’t end up hitting Sayaka instead.

Moreover, Sayaka’s winning personality wasn’t the sort to just stand and take it. Overlapping physical enchantments beyond her limits, she took Zana’s kick the hard way, ignoring defense and launching an all-out attack.

“Why you... Full Star/Saiha!”

“Oh wow!”

Sayaka unleashed a lethal blow toward the woman’s vitals that couldn’t be ignored—a palm strike targeting the diaphragm from point-blank range. Zana was forced to defend herself. The woman’s eyes sparkled with delight as Sayaka’s resistance exceeded her expectations.

Although she fended off the attack, this allowed Sayaka to create a crack in Zana’s movements, which had been completely flawless up to that point. The crack was as tiny as the eye of a needle, but it was the first opening she had shown.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Raising her silver spear, Yukina danced. Enveloped by vast spiritual energy amplified by Snowdrift Wolf, her physical capabilities temporarily reached a realm beyond human ken. She could not defeat Zana with close-combat skill. She could only overcome her foe with pure, overwhelming force.

“Heh, so marvelous. I just love that about you!”

Zana beamed as she read Yukina’s intentions. Then she adopted a stance the girl didn’t know. It was a beautiful pose resembling that of the deity dubbed the King of Dance.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me—!”

“Navaratri, First Goddess—Shailaputri!”

The silver knuckles Zana wore over her fists collided with Yukina’s spear head-on. The pressurized spiritual energy blew apart all at once, knocking both to their rears.

The light of the explosive spiritual essence filled the entire floor, robbing Kojou and The Blood of their vision.

But even amid that dazzling radiance, Kojou gazed only upon the girl trapped in the chunk of ice.

“Aurora—can you hear my voice?”

Kojou murmured under his breath.

Naturally, she didn’t reply.

But he knew. The blood of the Fourth Primogenitor that flowed through them linked both their souls. Memories of the past linked to will trained upon the future.

The eleven wings protruding from Kojou’s back transformed into eleven Beast Vassals.

The torrent of destructive demonic energy blew away the roof of Keystone Gate like it was nothing at all.

Spreading above their heads was the sky before daybreak. The morning glow spread like an aurora. A dawn sky.

Kojou summoning all of his Beast Vassals shook The Blood for an instant as he widened his eyes. Then he released his own twelve Beast Vassals.

The Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals collided with pitch-black Beast Vassals of equal strength.

But The Blood had a twelfth Beast Vassal that Kojou lacked. If their power was truly equal, Kojou would have no way of defeating him.

Yes. So long as Kojou’s twelfth Beast Vassal was not unleashed, this was absolute— “This time, I’ll grant your wish for real! I’ll bring you to our school—to Saikai Academy. Together with Asagi and Yaze and Nagisa—and me!”

Kojou reached his hand out toward the girl sleeping within the block of ice.

A moment later, she changed.

The color of her hair, gold like a shimmering flame, altered. Her eyelids, rimmed by long eyebrows, opened. She looked at Kojou with glimmering blue eyes. The ice enveloping her broke apart, and she reached out a slender arm toward Kojou. Rushing over, he grasped her hand.

Yukina, Sayaka, Zana, even The Blood—everyone present stared awestruck at the impossible scene.

Kojou and Aurora did not exchange a single word.

Gazing at each other for only an instant, they raised their joined hands overhead.

Then they shouted simultaneously. It was as if the two had become a single vampire— “—Come forth, Alrescha Glacies!”

A pale, transparent, monstrous bird of water spread its wings into the daybreak.

Pure cold enveloped the world around them, freezing everything in sight.

“Kojou...Akatsuki...!”

His entire body frozen white, The Blood looked completely lost as he stared at Kojou and Aurora with wide-open pupils.

Kojou could not defeat him so long as the twelfth Beast Vassal remained sealed. But if the twelfth Beast Vassal awakened, their mutual demonic energy capacity would determine who won the day.

The Blood, unable to endure even his own negative life force, could not triumph against the true Fourth Primogenitor, boasting inexhaustible demonic energy.

“Sister...why...?!”

Aurora’s hand joined Kojou’s as The Blood weakly posed her that question.

The next moment, his entire body broke into tiny pieces.

After becoming an ivory mist, the boy named Kenon was blown away in the

morning breeze, vanishing without a trace.

7

“Kojou...”

The blue-eyed girl gazed at him within the mist of pure-white cold.

Kojou embraced her tiny, frigid body.

They gazed at each other at a distance so close as to share the other's breaths. Perhaps it felt like being reunited at long last with one's other half.

“And so we meet again.”

The girl shook her head a little at his heartfelt comment.

“My soul has always been at thine side.”

“Yeah, seems that way.”

Kojou made a lonely smile as he nodded. From the time when she'd been completely annihilated until gaining a new body, Aurora's soul had dwelled inside Nagisa. He had spent time with her without ever being aware.

“I'm glad to see you anyway.”

He told her this.

“And I—”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. These were tears of joy and tears of parting regrets.

Now that the twelfth Beast Vassal had been released, her duty had come to an end.

A vampire that had lost its demonic energy could no longer maintain a physical body. The girl named Aurora Florestina would vanish—this time, completely.

Even so, the girl shook her head with a fleeting smile.

“Even if this ephemeral flesh must vanish, then there is no greater delight to

glimpse thee like this again.”

“Nah, I’m not losing you this time. No way.”

He asserted this with determination, as much to himself as to Avrora.

His eyes were dyed crimson. Fangs poked out from the impetuous smile on his lips.

“But...the collapse of my flesh is inescapable...”

The girl stared at her own two hands in disbelief. They had already begun to fade away.

Kojou clutched the girl to him tightly. She gasped, eyes widening.

His lips crept up her slender neck. Her soft flesh made his fangs throb.

“Sorry, Avrora.”

“Kojou...what art thou...?!”

Her voice cut off weakly. Finally, it changed into a ragged breath.

Still holding her firmly, Kojou embraced his feelings of guilt and prayed.

“Live, Avrora...! Even if I have to trade all my power for it...!”

The uppermost floor of Keystone Gate filled with white silence.

The Beast Vassals fighting in the sky above had vanished from sight, and the madly raging demonic energy had completely dissipated. Kojou and The Blood had surely ended their fight.

All that was left was a cold mist.

“Is it...over?”

Sayaka murmured with concern, wiping blood coursing from her lip.

Yukina closed her eyes, hanging her head without a word.

Kojou had released the twelfth Beast Vassal. This had awakened him as the complete Fourth Primogenitor, which also meant the annihilation of Avrora. The Blazing Banquet had been averted, and the Electoral War was nearing its conclusion.

But was this really the ending Kojou had hoped for? Yukina did not know.



Sayaka picked up the sword she had dropped.

The next moment, they heard a *clap, clap* of sparse applause from out of nowhere.

Yukina and Sayaka went on guard.

Appearing from within the hovering mist was a Caucasian, middle-aged man wearing a finely tailored suit.

“And so, the true ruler of Itogami Island has been born?”

The man spoke as he continued calmly clapping. His voice was gentle but carried well. It was the voice of someone accustomed to speaking in front of others.

“MAR president... Shahryar Ren...”

Sayaka spoke his name. The owner of Magna Ataraxia Research Inc.—one of the world’s few giant sorcerous manufacturing conglomerates. He was an immensely wealthy man with great influence in the worlds of politics and finance alike.

He had appeared before the Fourth Primogenitor’s battlefield with an amused smirk plastered over his face.

Automated weapons serving in place of bodyguards flanked his left and right—a pair of anti-demon robot tanks.

But the machine on his left suddenly released a crushing sound as something smashed it flat. The reinforced plastic armor was cleaved in two, its internal components flying all over the place. Sparks ferociously scattered as the tank’s functions ground to a halt.

“Why you! Finally found ya, Shahryar!”

A youth in dreadlocks wearing punk clothing appeared from deeper down the corridor—the former Prison Barrier escapee, Shtola D. Swinging an invisible blade, he destroyed the other robot tank as well.

Finally, his gaze shifted toward Shahryar Ren. Shtola raised his right hand high to generate another invisible blade.

“Take this, Thunder—”

“Loud, aren’t you?”

Ren’s expression did not shift as he snapped the fingers of his right hand.

That instant, blood burst from Schtola’s abdomen. He crumpled to his knees, wearing an incredulous expression as blood continued to spew.

“I hadn’t wished to sully my audience with the new king with unnecessary bloodshed...but perhaps this, too, is a fitting entrance for the Fourth Primogenitor.”

As Schtola cried in anguish, Ren stared down at him, unaffected.

He’d used the same invisible blade ability as Schtola D. But his speed and precision were on a completely different scale. Shahryar Ren’s blow had been overwhelmingly polished. He was a different level of Deva.

“...Deva, psychokinesis...”

Sayaka murmured with a shaking voice. Ren made an exaggerated shake of his head and laughed sarcastically.

“I would prefer you call it Divine Power. I have no desire to be compared to psychics...those charlatans your kind call Hyper Adapters.”

“Damn...you!!”

Bloodied and fallen, Schtola D wailed expletives as he glared at the president of MAR. Then, with the look of a man facing certain death, he called out to Sayaka.

“Hey, lady!! Stop that bastard Shahryar R! He’s planning to *open Keystone Gate!*”

“Open...Keystone Gate?”

She raised a perplexed voice.

The Keystone Gate building served as a crucial structure for Itogami Island, but that didn’t mean it could actually open up.

However, when he heard Schtola’s words, Ren said, “Oh,” raising an eyebrow, as though impressed.

Then he produced a sword from inside his suit. It was an exceptionally aged steel short sword.

“Would you finally show your face, Fourth Primogenitor? Or should I call you the Former Fourth Primogenitor—Kojou Akatsuki?”

Ren called out as he glared deeper into the mist that was finally thinning.

Yukina and Sayaka also turned their eyes in in the direction of the footsteps approaching from down the passage.

Emerging from the parting white mist was Kojou. But the impression he gave off was not that of the Kojou who Yukina and Sayaka knew. The hair on his head, once golden, had reverted to its previous shade. And in his arms he carried a tiny, golden-haired girl.

“Sen...pai...?”

“Avrora Florestina hasn’t disappeared... So that’s it...”

Yukina and Sayaka both spoke up.

Kojou had settled his battle with The Blood. He had unleashed the twelfth Beast Vassal and averted the Blazing Banquet. And yet, he was carrying Avrora, who should have disappeared.

“So this was your choice...Kojou Akatsuki. You chose her over the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Ren continued to clutch his sword as he let out a *kuh-kuh* laugh.

His statement made Yukina understand just what had happened to Kojou.

If the Beast Vassal in her body was released, Avrora would dissipate.

The unsealed Beast Vassal would return to the side of the Fourth Primogenitor, its proper host and master, and the artificial vampire Avrora would lose her Beast Vassal, the source of demonic energy she needed to maintain her flesh and blood.

But if the released Beast Vassal was returning to the Fourth Primogenitor’s side, *all Kojou had to do was make Avrora the Fourth Primogenitor*—and that was what he’d chosen.

Overwriting the soul. Kojou had transplanted all of the abilities of the Fourth Primogenitor into Aurora.

Of course, had he been born as the Fourth Primogenitor, there was no way he could have done this. He was born as a human. He was an irregular Fourth Primogenitor, turned into a vampire after the fact.

And it was none other than Aurora who'd turned him into the Fourth Primogenitor. Kojou was simply returning the power of the Fourth Primogenitor she'd loaned to him to begin with.

Thus, the Twelfth, Aurora, last of the Kaleid Bloods, had turned into the true Fourth Primogenitor.

Into a complete Fourth Primogenitor served by all twelve Beast Vassals—"Fabricated that she is, you threw away the power of the World's Mightiest Vampire for her nonetheless. What a truly dramatic conclusion. Not one I can comprehend whatsoever—but that's fine. At any rate, the fact remains that a complete Fourth Primogenitor has been revived. Here and now, let us offer this altar known as Itogami Island as the fuel to open this great gate."

"Fuel...you say?"

Kojou's expression hardened as he looked at the short sword Shahryar Ren raised high.

At that moment, he realized its steely light resembled the sorcerous devices of the Sinful God.

"Keystone Gate is...!"

Sayaka exclaimed, realizing that something was very wrong with the building they were in.

The entirety of the giant Keystone Gate rumbled. Its outer wall was dyed in a malignant, metallic darkness. It was resonating with the short sword Ren held aloft.

"Four years ago—when the Twelfth Kaleid Blood was discovered in the Mediterranean, it was not by mere chance that she was transported to Itogami Island. Everything and everyone has been dancing on MAR's palm."

Still holding his short sword in the air, Ren explained with a soliloquy like an actor on the stage.

“Nonetheless, this is not a circumstance to boast of. Thanks to a string of irregular incidents, the revival of the complete Fourth Primogenitor was considerably delayed.”

“Guoa...?!”

Sustaining an invisible impact, Kojou went flying. This was Shahryar Ren’s telekinesis at work.

He’d escaped without injury, but that was undoubtedly because the MAR president had held back.

He hadn’t done this out of consideration for Kojou. Rather, Ren’s objective was to rip Aurora out of Kojou’s hands.

“Aurora?!”

Her slumbering body floated up into the sky above Keystone Gate.

It wasn’t just the building resonating with Shahryar Ren’s sorcerous device. The steely darkness now swallowed Aurora as well.

Ren’s short sword must have been the legacy of the Devas he’d stolen.

Moreover, the Fourth Primogenitor was itself an artificial vampire produced by the Devas. It was hardly unthinkable that the two might be connected.

Additionally, MAR had been deeply involved in the construction of Itogami Island itself. Naturally, that included the design of Keystone Gate.

The altar that was Itogami Island. The complete Fourth Primogenitor. The sorcerous device of the Devas— In that place, in that moment, Shahryar Ren had assembled everything he sought.

“Even the irregular incidents brought bountiful harvests of their own. The appearance of New Itogami Island. The coordinates for New Itogami Island as displayed by Glenda, Dragon of the Swamp. And the data for The Cleansing left by Asagi Aiba—the conditions to open Keystone Gate have been fulfilled. All that remains is making a sacrifice upon the altar.”

Twelve wings spread from Aurora as she floated in the sky.

The inexhaustible energy of the Fourth Primogenitor was fueling Keystone Gate.

Kojou and the others could only gaze upon this in awe. They didn't even know what was happening.

They hear a *clang* from behind.

A huge swordsman, his entire body covered in armor, plummeted down from midair. It was the man from the Georgius—the dragon slayer—and a former escaped prisoner just like Schtola D.

“Why you... Dumblegraff! Don't let yourself get beat that easy, you stupid jerk!”

Schtola D heaped abuse upon the gravely wounded swordsman. Come to mention it, he was on the verge of death himself.

The bronze-colored dragon had cast the man out of the sky. He was the last acolyte of the Order of the End—the Flame Dragon.

“It seems you had quite a difficult duel, Kreyd.”

Shahryar Ren spoke amiably to the dragon dancing its way down.

This shocked Kojou. He understood that MAR had been connected to the Order of the End behind the scenes, but he would have never imagined that a confidant of The Blood would turn out to be Ren's pawn.

“As promised, I shall show you the landscape you dragons call home.”

Ignoring everyone else's shock, Ren touched the blade of his short sword.

That instant, the world completely changed.

The color of steel blotted out the brightening sky.

“A city...in the sky...”

Yukina's voice trembled.

In the black clouds swirling over the entirety of Itogami Island was a giant, spiraling city.

Its shape bore an uncanny resemblance to New Itogami Island—the fortress city that Cain the Sinful God had left behind.

But his was on a completely different scale.

Even the vastness of New Itogami Island amounted to nothing more than a fraction of the fantastical city floating in the sky.

Itogami Island, floating atop the Pacific Ocean.

And this otherworldly metropolis, floating in the sky.

The two cities were like mirror images of each other. When you stared straight up at the city overhead, it was unclear which was really the ground and which was really the sky. Kojou felt like the firmament might collapse on their heads.

And linking the two was a single girl—a vampire with twelve wings.

“That landscape...!”

Kojou moaned as he gazed at the skyline of the fantastical city. Kojou knew it well. He’d seen it in the memories of Cain the Sinful God.

“This is the true form of the floating artificial isle once ruled by Cain the Sinful God—the place you call Nod.”

Shahryar Ren gazed upon Kojou with delight as he elucidated.

The words *artificial isle* sounded ridiculous to Kojou. After all, a city so enormous as to cover the entire sky might as well be called a continent.

“Only one who possesses demonic energy rivaling Cain can link this world to Nod. In other words, only the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire built to destroy him—”

Confirming for himself that the otherworldly structure had completely materialized, Ren lowered his short sword.

The metallic darkness shrouding Keystone Gate vanished, and the structure’s rumbling halted as well.

The wings vanished from Aurora’s back. As if strings suspending her had been cut, she began a slow descent—not toward the surface but toward the heavens

— “What’s your goal, Shahryar Ren?”

Kojou glared at the Caucasian Deva.

Ren looked back at Kojou with an exceptionally cold smile.

“I hated you, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“What...?”

“I loathed that you were born as a human but obtained the powers of the Fourth Primogenitor. It is the Devas’ hatred that grants vampires their power. It is not something for a lowly human to touch!”

Ren’s naked ire slammed into Kojou. It felt as though his skin were being pricked.

As he stood now, Kojou was merely a powerless civilian. With his Divine Power, Ren could surely kill him without so much as lifting a single finger.

And yet, Ren did not. He needed to let Kojou live so that he could appreciate his own powerlessness and suffer.

“—I have obtained the power of Nod that agonized we Devas so during the Great Cleansing of Old. Now we have regained the world once more. The Blood said as much, didn’t he? The victor of the Electoral War would become the ruler of this entire world.”

Ren spread both his arms wide, intoxicated.

His words were not some empty boast. Even just the Nalakuvera in New Itogami Island had enough power to reduce a small country to rubble with ease. Kojou couldn’t even imagine what the might that gigantic floating city came equipped with. Even with the combined combat strength of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization, it felt like they wouldn’t be able to hold a candle to that.

Ren had to be stopped before he got his hands on it. But—

“Now you are powerless to stop me. You, who willingly abandoned the power of the Fourth Primogenitor—!”

The caustic words of the descendant of the Devas impaled Kojou.

The bronze dragon flapped his wings as he let Ren onto its front claw.

They were going to head up to Nod before anyone else. Ren's subordinates—helicopters with MAR combat units aboard—rose up from all over New Itogami Island.

“Aurora...”

Even once the dragon had faded from his vision, Kojou kept his eyes locked skyward.

Looking at the steel city covering the sky, he strained to find the girl that had fallen somewhere within.

The girl that had been revived as the new Fourth Primogenitor—

“Just you wait...Aurora.”

As he made that promise to the sky, Kojou clenched his fist.

The small fist of a powerless human being.



OUTRO

OUTRO

From the deck of a submersible aircraft carrier alongside Itogami Island, Giada Kukulkin looked up at the heavens.

Hovering like a mirage was a fantastical cityscape that glimmered with steel.

It was an inverted city, facing Itogami Island like its mirror image.

“Nod...is it?”

Narrowing her jade eyes, Giada murmured indifferently.

The air behind her back swayed and shimmered. A vampire in a red dress rode the back of a giant divine bird as it fluttered downward.

“Quite a nostalgic landscape, is it...not?”

Aswadguhl smiled fondly as the morning breeze toyed with his purple hair.

Giada narrowed her eyes, guarded. It was rare for someone normally so haughty to let her emotions show to this extent.

“What have you come for, Malik? Surely you aren’t actually planning to fight in this children’s game they call the Electoral War?”

As Giada bared her feelings of disgust, Aswadguhl calmly gazed back at her and sighed.

“Kenon has dissipa...ted.”

“...Is that so?”

Giada’s eyebrows made a distinct *twitch*.

The prototype Fourth Primogenitor, Number Zero of the Kaleid Bloods—she did not have a special attachment to him, but to the unaging, undying vampire primogenitors, he was one of their precious few fellows who had inhabited the world since time immemorial. She couldn’t help but feel a twinge of loneliness over his annihilation.

Aswad's next words erased her sentiments.

"Kojou Akatsuki has abandoned the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, it would...seem."

"To save Dodekatos, I take it? That man truly betrays our expectations to the end."

Giada grimaced, frustrated.

The human boy who had the power of the Fourth Primogenitor through a misfortunate twist of fate—she'd fought him once. The battle was a bit of play to substitute for a greeting, but the fact remained that his mysterious resilience had stirred her heart. His "companion" girls had also amused her to a fair degree. Perhaps she was fond enough of the boy named Kojou Akatsuki that she had anticipated the day he would become the complete Fourth Primogenitor.

"But his decision is in error. A manufactured ' Mightiest ' cannot win—not against us and not against the Devas."

"I suppose...not... It is disappoint...ing... Truly...disappointing."

Aswad closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

Hmph, went Giada's little snort as she looked up at the firmament once more.

Nod had appeared in the real world thanks to the Twelfth, Avrora, turned Fourth Primogenitor. The Electoral War and The Blood had been nothing more than tools to bring this about.

The same went for Giada and her peers. Notwithstanding the fact they'd intentionally gone along with the mastermind's scheme, it didn't feel particularly good to be played like that.

"What will you do...now, Chaos Bride?"

Aswad asked this with a smile as if he was reading her heart.

Taking *his* bait, Giada made a ferocious smile.

"As if you need to ask. The Electoral War determines the ruler of Nod, does it not?"

“Tee-hee, perhaps finally our desire shall be...granted?”

Aswad turned a suggestive gaze toward the otherworldly metropolis.

“Desire...you say. What is your desire, Fallgazer? Is it war? Destruction, perhaps?”

Giada asked that of the purple-haired primogenitor with an air of scorn.

Aswadguhl said nothing in reply. He merely curled up the corners of his beautiful lips.

The Simurgh flapped its enormous wings, soaring up into the sky of daybreak.

Giada watched the creature leave without a word.

It was the dawn of the deadly engagement that would determine who obtained the right to rule that fantastical city.



Dressed in a gym outfit, Asagi Aiba was tying up her sleep-mussed hair as she peered at a personal computer screen. The screen was packed full of countless windows through which binary data was coursing in with incredible force. A normal person wouldn't be able to make hide nor hair of the information, but when she stared at it, her eyes filled with shock.

“The Gigafloat Management Corporation's functions came back online...?”

Heat blew out from the large mainframe computer installed in the Dem-Club clubroom as its fans rotated at full power. It couldn't cope with the previously dammed-up information cascading in all at once.

“What the heck's going on, Mogwai?! What's that thing floating in the sky?! What's up with the Electoral War?!”

Asagi posed these questions to her partner AI.

However, the avatar in the form of a badly sewn teddy bear said nothing in reply. He was lazily spinning in the corner of the screen, as though he were a polygon without a will of his own.

“...Mogwai?”

Asagi operated her keyboard. She tried to restart her AI client app, but before she could input the command, her screen jumbled.

Mogwai's CG image split apart. Strange symbols appeared in its place.

There were lines of short characters arrayed in some kind of code. Someone who wasn't Asagi had stuffed some kind of message into Mogwai—or rather, into Itogami Island's main computer.

"The hell...is this...?"

Asagi muttered, perplexed and gazing at the lines of characters.

The shock in her wide-open eyes grew greater still.



In the ruin of the completely wrecked warehouse, Yuiri Haba held her knees as she crouched.

She hung her head, her cheeks drenched with tears, letting out small, suppressed sobs.

"Yui, are you all right?"

Shio squatted beside her and called out to her in concern. However, the girl did not lift her face. All she could do to reply was let out a little hiccup.

"Do your wounds hurt?"

Shio asked this as she looked over the girl's tattered uniform. Since she'd borne the brunt of an attack from The Blood's Beast Vassal, her wounds were the injuries of the people who remained here.

That said, ritual spell treatment was effective. In a week, she wouldn't even have any scars.

Yui shook her head silently, as if to say, *I'm fine*.

"Then stop crying already."

Shio told her this as she placed her hands on her best friend's shoulders. Yui lifted her tearful face and looked at Shio. She was weeping defenselessly, like a young child.

“I mean... I...tried to...kill Miss Avrora...”

“Well, you couldn’t help it. Yukina Himeragi and Avrora understood exactly how you felt, Yuiri.”

Shio hugged her crying friend. Yuiri’s decision to try and kill Avrora to stop the Blazing Banquet hadn’t been wrong. After all, Yukina had tried to do the exact same thing, and Avrora had accepted that fate as well. No one was blaming Yuiri—no one, save the woman herself.

Motoki Yaze watched Yuiri and Shio together like that from a slightly removed location.

“A floating artificial isle... Another Itogami Island, huh...”

Since Itogami Island’s communications network had recovered, the Order of the End must have no longer been occupying Keystone Gate. A flood of messages from the Gigafloat Management Corporation was reaching his smartphone.

Thanks to The Blood’s annihilation and the riot instigated by rogue ruler candidates, the Electoral War taking place on land had devolved into a temporary ceasefire.

Nevertheless, three vampire primogenitors still remained on Itogami Island. The Electoral War wasn’t over. The stage where the conflict was set had shifted to the wondrous metropolis in the sky. That was all.

“So the fate of the world is riding on whoever gets control of Nod first, huh? Well, isn’t this is a mess.”

Yaze rudely clicked his tongue as he shook his head.

Even if it grasped the situation, there was nothing more the Gigafloat Management Corporation could do about it.

The greatest fighting strength the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island had up its sleeve was the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

But that Fourth Primogenitor no longer existed.

The boy called the Fourth Primogenitor was no more.



The ocean's horizon was pronounced when viewed from the topmost floor of the half-destroyed Keystone Gate.

The water was as blue and clear as a gemstone. Scarlet gradients spread out toward the sky. The sun hovering in the gap between sea and sky gave off a fiery glow.

Kojou and Yukina stood side by side as they gazed straight at it.

"So pretty, Himeragi."

The offhand murmur coming from Kojou made Yukina lift her face in surprise.

Yukina's cheek shone red with the light of morning as he stared at it.

"I'd forgotten for all that time that the light of the sun can feel this good."

He added in a voice that sounded...cheerful, somehow. *Yeah*, went Yukina as she nodded in apparent agreement. *So that's what he meant*, she thought, shrugging in embarrassment.

"You're really human again."

Yukina stated this as if she was keenly absorbing that fact.

The vampirized Kojou had greeted the morning sun with nothing but gloom as the excessive dazzle pricked at his skin. Even if they wouldn't actually turn him to ash, the fact remained it was an unpleasant stimulus.

Now he stared at it, deeply moved. Even he must have been surprised by this.

"I always thought it was possible. That if Avrora became the real Fourth Primogenitor, not just a vessel to seal a Beast Vassal inside of, she wouldn't have to disappear—"

Turning serious, he tried to justify himself.

It hadn't been a baseless gamble. Even if it had been for a single moment in time, Avrora had been the Fourth Primogenitor once before. Chances were high that the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor would acknowledge her as their host and master.

But of course, that didn't mean he was certain everything would go that well.

"You do know you could have been totally annihilated, don't you, senpai?"

Yukina glared at him reproachfully.

"Oh, yeah...suppose that could have happened, too."

He shrugged and limply smiled.

There had been no guarantee that he would become human again after relinquishing the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. The natural thing was for a vampire to dissipate when he'd lost his demonic energy. That Kojou could greet the morning like this was a stroke of luck, not calculation. Small wonder this impulsive action bothered Yukina.

"Goodness...you really are incorrigible, huh?"

Like someone scolding her misbehaving little brother, Yukina made an exaggerated sigh.

Feeling like he was in for a prolonged lecture, Kojou hastily tried to change the subject.

"Hm, come to think of it, where's Kirasaka?"

"She went off to see Master to report about President Ren's actions and about Miss Avrora."

She replied soberly.

"I see."

Kojou gave a lonely grin as he looked up at the sky.

Shahryar Ren's ambitions had become clear. Now that the Electoral War was playing out on the stage of Nod, the Lion King Agency couldn't simply let it slide. Sayaka and the others were probably going to head into Nod and chase after him.

"Then this is where we part ways, huh, Himeragi?"

"...Wh-what?"

Yukina blinked in surprise. Her reaction genuinely perplexed him.

“You’re the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, right? Then you don’t have any reason to hang around me any longer, do you?”

“...Hang around?”

She tapered her lips in a pout. Kojou’s careless words had implied she was a nuisance.

“Er, I mean, you’ve been taking care of me up to now, so in spite of everything, I am grateful and all.”

“In spite of... I see... So that’s how it is...”

As he hastily tried to amend his words, she continued glaring at him as she let out a fervent *siiigh*.

“Just to make this clear, I’ll be sticking with you, senpai.”

“Eh? Why?”

“Why are you so unhappy about it?!”

Yukina rolled her eyes in anger, thrusting her right hand before him.

On her finger, she wore a silver sorcerous device in the form of a ring. This used the Fourth Primogenitor’s negative life force to keep her excessive spiritual energy in check.

“Have you forgotten? Because you’re no longer a vampire, I am unable to use spiritual energy. After all, I became your ‘Blood Servant’ to keep my spiritual energy from running amok.”

“Ah... Oh yeah...then your...”

Kojou stared at her, dumbfounded. His decision to relinquish the power of the Fourth Primogenitor had taken her power from her.

Yukina, however, shook her head without a single word of complaint.

“Yes. I am no longer a Sword Shaman, just as you are no longer the Fourth Primogenitor.”

She teasingly smiled up at the shaken boy.

Then her expression abruptly tightened and sharpened.

“Besides, just because you’ve turned back into a mere human being doesn’t mean you’re going to abandon Avrora, right?”

He looked back at her, wordless for a time. Her stare never wavered. Kojou raised both hands in a show of defeat, surrendering to eyes that seemed to stare through everything.

“Avrora became the Fourth Primogenitor and fell into Nod because of me.”

He murmured quietly, keeping his emotions in check. She nodded slowly and silently.

“I can’t let that guy, or anyone else, use her again. Don’t matter if it’s Devas or primogenitors. I’ll bring Avrora back. From here on, this is my fight...!”

Kojou clenched a fist against his chest.

Yukina tapped the back of his hand with her own fist. Then she enveloped both of her hands around his hand, as though praying. It was a childlike gesture so unlike her usual overserious self.

“No, senpai. This is our fight.”

“Himeragi...”

Her words, spoken like they were the most natural thing in the world, left him at a loss before he burst into a tiny fit of laughter. Yukina seemed faintly peeved as she gripped Kojou’s hands, perhaps dissatisfied by his reaction.

“Let’s go.”

Yukina smiled strongly as she spoke.

Right now, Kojou did not have the strength of the Fourth Primogenitor. Compared to the destructive and bizarre abilities the descendants of the Devas and the vampire primogenitors possessed, he was powerless. But despite that, he still had things he needed to do.

And he wasn’t alone.

“Yeah.”

Kojou looked up at the fantastical city floating in the sky. Somewhere therein was the Fourth Primogenitor, Avrora Florestina—the girl he had to bring back.

After gazing upon it, he walked toward the city spreading out before him on the earth—the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island.

There he went, to obtain the power to fulfill his desires once again—



Afterword

The time is year one of the Reiwa period—!

And so, the first *Strike the Blood* of the new era has arrived.

This volume continues the Electoral War arc where the previous left off. This time, however, the middle of the Electoral War has largely reached its conclusion.

To be honest, I've kept on writing just because I've wanted to portray the last scene with Yukina and Kojou ever since the War of the Primogenitors arc, so I'm kind of sighing in relief that I somehow made it there safe and sound.

I'm being greedy in saying this, but I would have liked to have written more about the state of ordinary people caught up in the fighting between nameless rogue ruler candidates. Of course, there just weren't pages to spare for that, and that idea was mercilessly cut. I really would have loved writing about the mob-level demons, hyped up and jostling with one another in places totally unrelated to Kojou and company...but I guess that's for a spin-off movie by some unknown director.

Setting all that aside, next time, the stage finally shifts to that other city, to an episode where everything will be settled. You'll have to wait a little longer before things return to normal everyday life.

In this volume, Kojou had relatively few opportunities for action (though I felt the ones we got were delectable), but next volume he goes back to basics in a certain sense, with the story revolving around Kojou and Yukina (and also Avrrora). I humbly ask that you stick with me till the very end!

Now then, in parallel with the novel version, the OVA release *Strike the Blood III* advances apace. It's expected to be five sections in all (at the time this manuscript was written), and the first two are now on sale. The contents will

cover volume 13 “The Roses of Tartarus” to volume 14 “Golden Days.”

Furthermore, we’ve decided to put on a theatrical version of volume 15 “War of the Primogenitors.” In recent days I (finally) read the complete scenario to the very end, and personally, since there’s so many scenes I want to see in anime form, I think it will live up to your expectations. By all means, I’d be very happy if you all appreciate it.

Also, Ryuryu Akari’s *Strike the Blood: This Is Saikai Academy Middle School* is being serialized in *Dengeki Bunko Magazine*.

It’s a four-panel comic about daily life in middle school with Yukina, Nagisa, and Kanon as the main characters. Since people other than those three appear as guest characters, I enjoy wondering just what she’s going to draw every time. You should also check that out!

Nothing very amusing has happened to me personally as of late, but February 2019 here is my twentieth anniversary since my author debut.

My debut work, *Gold Gehenna*, was published by Dengeki Bunko just like this work.

Longevity isn’t the mark of greatness in this industry, but I’ve been able to keep my writing up for this length of time thanks to all you readers who’ve been with me every step of the way. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart. Thank you!

So having reached the end of this temporal milestone, I think I just have to keep walking forward one step at a time at my own pace. I want to write all sorts of new works this year, too, and I’m happy to have all kinds of projects planned. I’ll do my best!

To Manyako, my kind illustrator, you’ve been a huge help this time once again. As befitting a series reaching its twentieth volume, adding more and more new characters adds fuel to the chaos, but I am truly grateful you’re able to draw any of these characters, no matter whom, with so much charm.

Allow me to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone related to the production and distribution of this book. I apologize for all the trouble on the schedule front until the very, very end of the Heisei period.

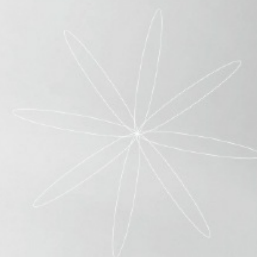
And, of course, I give my unreserved thanks to all of you who have read this book.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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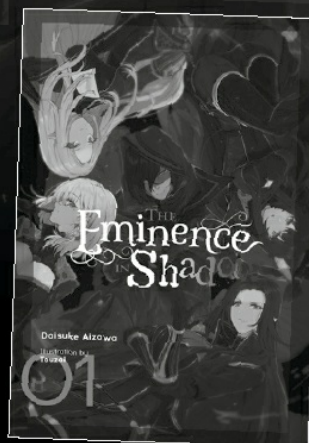


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